
SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY THE REVIEW
EDGE
THE FUTURE
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DECEMBER 2017

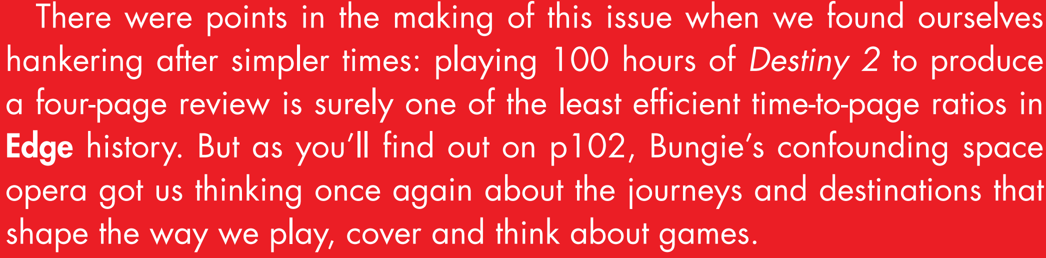

Bowser
&
Peach
A ROYAL WEDDING

Leaves are falling all around, time I was on my way

It may seem a little odd to open the first page of an issue by talking about its final one, but we hope you'll forgive us the indulgence just this once. This issue we introduce a new back-page feature, The Long Game, a space for us to check in on titles that have continued to grow and shift long after launch. Games have changed. A release date is often merely a starting line, and we cannot simply draw a line under something after we review it. Modern games are journeys that change with every new DLC pack and balance patch. They have destinations that are nebulous and fuzzy, and depend on a player's tastes. What does it mean to 'complete' a *Minecraft*, a *Call Of Duty*, or a *League Of Legends*?



Exclusive subscriber edition



There were points in the making of this issue when we found ourselves hankering after simpler times: playing 100 hours of *Destiny 2* to produce a four-page review is surely one of the least efficient time-to-page ratios in **Edge** history. But as you'll find out on p102, Bungie's confounding space opera got us thinking once again about the journeys and destinations that shape the way we play, cover and think about games.

And, indeed, the way developers make them, too. In this month's An Audience With, Robin Hunicke tells us of her ethical and moral concerns about making games in augmented and virtual reality; that violence, for example, could have a lasting real-world effect on someone who sees it through so immersive a lens. Just because something *can* be made, does not mean that it should. The end does not always justify the means, nor the destination the journey that preceded it.



These are complex, tumultuous times for games, in other words, and for the people that play and make them, too. And in challenging times, we need constants. Well, here he is: 278 issues ago, Mario made his first appearance on the cover of Edge. For the second time this year, he's back on it – and what a journey he's been on this time. You'll find our world-exclusive review of *Super Mario Odyssey* on p98.



games





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Past glories

At Tokyo Game Show 2017, Japan's game developers seem more interested in reprising the past than pushing things forward

Private sales of nuclear fallout bunkers have, in recent months, reached their highest levels yet in Japan. Such is the level of national anxiety of being almost-neighbours to a North Korean megalomaniac who routinely plunges test rockets into the Sea Of Japan. Still, the existential dread that accompanies this kind of international sabre-rattling (not to mention the last shoe-soaking downpours of a lingering monsoon) only slightly dampened the atmosphere of this year's Tokyo Game Show, which still managed to lure a quarter of a million visitors to its cavernous, gloomy venue, the Makuhari Messe convention centre. Here, on the bleak industrial outskirts of the city, a little over 600 companies, including a clutch of international indie developers, showed up. As in recent years, however, many of the big hitters, from Nintendo to EA, from Activision to Ubisoft, were conspicuous by their absence. In fact, there were 200 fewer games on display compared to last year, when 1,523 games made the journey to the show floor.

These shrinking numbers are, surely, a function of the diminishing role that these thundering shows play in the business of promoting and selling videogames at a time when a well-promoted tweet or precision-placed YouTube advertisement can shove a game in front of far many more eyes than any stand in a deafening, reeking exhibition centre. During TGS week the founder of one of Japan's highest-profile PR agencies quietly admitted that he now advises smaller developers against booking space at the show. Far better, he said, to spend the money on a social-media campaign, where the competition may be equally stiff, but the potential audience is many magnitudes greater.



Thankfully, for this year's attendees at least (the first two days of the show are restricted to the trade, the second two to the public) most of the larger Japanese publishers are yet to heed this kind of advice. Capcom gave the majority of its booth's space over to *Monster Hunter World*, the latest entry in a series in which, despite a relatively small global following, the company continues to generously invest (the fact that brothers Ryozo and Haru Tsujimoto, who both coined and produce the series, are the sons of Capcom CEO Kenzo Tsujimoto may or may not have something to do with this). Questions of nepotism aside, *Monster Hunter World*, with its elemental huntsman appeal, wide scope for improvisation and showboating, and a more formal, guided story than ever before, has surely the best chance yet of becoming a breakout hit outside of its homeland, where, judging by the queues at TGS, it will be a guaranteed success. A simultaneous global release date of January 26, 2018, was announced during Sony's TGS press conference.

> A PR quietly admitted that he now advises smaller developers against booking space at the show

Capcom made much of the fifth anniversary of *Dragon's Dogma*, another game centred on felling mythical beasts, which is due for re-release on current-generation machines later this year, no doubt hoping that the refresher will drive some players into *Dragon's Dogma Online*'s somewhat forsaken servers (a code to jump the first 70 character levels in the MMO was given out to every attendee). The company has further raided its vaults with Clover Studio's *Okami*, the last game that Hideki Kamiya directed for Capcom, which is due yet another, further beautified release later this year, complete with PS4 Pro optimization. Regretfully, there appears to be no Switch version. TGS brought the news that Nintendo's machine will, however, host *Resident Evil Revelations 2*, Yasuhiro Anpo's generally well-received, action-heavy take on the horror series. A Gold Edition of *Resident Evil 7* was also on show, a sort of ultimate package that bundles the original game with three DLC add-ons, including the forthcoming final chapter, the forebodingly titled End Of Zoe. The game only had a minor presence at Capcom's booth, but, thanks to *Resident Evil 7*'s favourable critical reception overseas, it was mentioned by numerous devs around the show as a bright example of how Japanese companies can still compete with their Western counterparts, even if that particular game's sales didn't quite match the enthusiasm of the critics.

Final Fantasy XV, that long-troubled, finally redeemed project, is a game that, according to many senior Japanese devs at the show, has served as another ▶

With 254,311 visitors recorded across its four days, nearly four times as many people attended TGS as went to E3 – which, for the first time, was officially opened to the public in 2017





LEFT ***Resident Evil 7*****'s final chapter, End Of Zoe, will reveal the fate of the titular member of the Baker family, who both terrorised and aided Ethan Winters in the original game.**
ABOVE **The *Monster Hunter* series can feel impenetrable to newcomers. Capcom hopes to ease *Monster Hunter World*'s learning curve via a helpful character known as The Handler**





ABOVE ***Final Fantasy XV Multiplayer Expansion: Comrades*** **allows players to create and customise their own characters for the first time in a mainline, non-MMO entry to the series.**
RIGHT ***Dragon's Dogma Dark Arisen*****, released, perhaps, to rekindle interest in advance of a formal sequel, includes all of the original game's DLC, plus new hairstyles and weapons**

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST?

Konami v Kojima



Few would contend that, in the PR war between Konami and Hideo Kojima, the company sustained significantly more damage than its former star developer. *Metal Gear Survive* is the first significant test for those developers charged with the unenviable task of wrangling Kojima's legacy. At TGS, attendees had the opportunity to play a four-player co-op survival mission, defending a base from incoming enemies with crafted weapons. Zombies may not feature in Kojima's vision for the series, but as both *Call Of Duty* and *Red Dead Redemption* have shown, the undead can wheedle out a place in even the most narrow of fictions.






particular national inspiration. Here is an expensive gamble that handsomely paid off (in the company's end-of-year results call earlier this year, Square Enix reported that, "The greatest contributor to earnings there was *Final Fantasy XV*, which achieved global sales of six million units faster than any previous title in the franchise"). Whether any long-term damage has been done by the questionable decision to split the game's essential story across various media remains to be seen, but Square is obviously using the game's success as a springboard to create further spin-offs, most notably with the multiplayer expansion, *Final Fantasy XV Comrades*, and the barmy VR-enabled *Monster Of The Deep*, which in November will spin the game's fishing minigame out into a *Get Bass*-style standalone diversion.

In this, the 30th anniversary year of the company's flagship series, *Final Fantasy* dominated Square Enix's sprawling TGS stand. Rising above the card games and mobile phone spin-offs was *Dissidia Final Fantasy NT*, a fighting game developed by Koei Tecmo's Team Ninja that has, since its 2015 coin-op debut, proven to be a tectonic-shifting success in Japan's arcades. In January the game finally receives a home release on PS4, and during TGS it was announced that Prince Noctis, protagonist of *FFXV*, will make an appearance as a playable character.

Like Capcom, Square Enix is a company well-used to reheating past successes, and in coming months remakes of *Dragon Quest X*, *Final Fantasy IX* (whose arrival was lovingly revealed during Sony's press conference) and, most enticingly, the Super Nintendo classic *Secret Of Mana*, will provide an enviable clutch. But the company is also clearly investing in new RPGs too. *Lost Sphear*, the second game from its internal, skunkworks start-up, Tokyo RPG Factory, is set for release before the end of the year. Then, there was the announcement of the preposterously titled *Octopath Traveller*, a Switch-exclusive game, also from the *I Am Setsuna* team, which features a more ambitious party of eight playable warriors.



Hiro Isono, who created *Secret Of Mana*'s memorable original concept art died in 2013. Controversially, Square-Enix has opted to redraw Isono's character designs for its substantial forthcoming remake

Square Enix's most prominent TGS revelation, however, was announced during Sony's press conference. *Left Alive* is a mecha combat game set within the once-defunct *Front Mission* universe, directed by Toshifumi Nabeshima and that features the unmistakeable artwork of *Metal Gear Solid*'s Yoji Shinkawa. Despite the fact that *Left Alive*'s story takes place between *Front Mission 5* and *Front Mission Evolved*, the ponderous, tactical RPG pacing of Wanzer-sniping for which the series is best-known appears to be gone. The focus of the tantalising snippet of footage was on a human soldier bustling through the dark, laying traps for the bipedal tanks, with their sweeping searchlights and ten-ton Gatling guns. Thirdperson direct-control action has been a slim part of the series' tradition, but here it appears to provide the dominant mode of play.

Perhaps the most surprising stand was a hulking structure given over to Playerunknown's Battlegrounds

Left Alive's announcement took pride of place in Sony's press conference, loosely followed by the company's full-throated support of Capcom's *Monster Hunter World*. Firstparty games, however, were scant, limited to new footage of the somewhat flimsy-looking remake of Fumito Ueda's masterpiece, *Shadow Of The Colossus*, and another so-called remaster in the form of *Zone Of The Enders: The 2nd Runner*, which will benefit from VR support. For cat lovers (and collectors), the news that breakout mobile hit *Neko Atsume* is coming to PSVR softened the blow of what was otherwise a lacklustre showing for Sony on its home turf.

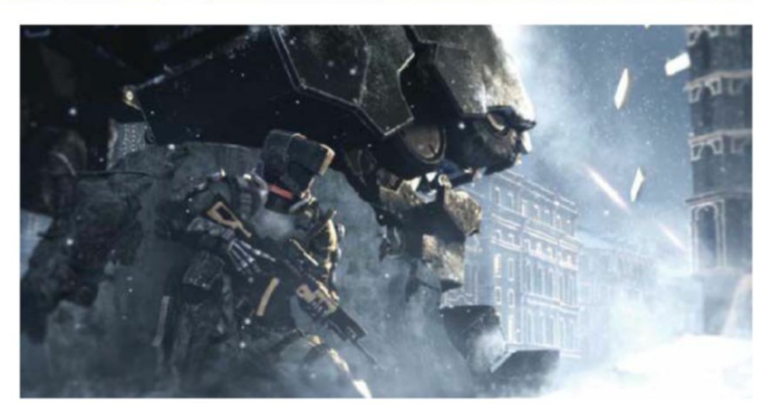
TGS always offers a bountiful harvest of curios and the 2017 show was no exception. D3 revealed no fewer than three new entries to its giant-insect thirdperson shooter series *Earth Defence Force*. One of which, subtitled Wingdiver The Shooter, takes the unlikely form of a vertical shoot 'em up in the Cave style. The publisher's strangest offering, however, was *Happy Manager*, a PS4 game in which you move in to a provincial apartment in Hansaki City with three 'quirky' women, who sporadically confide in you while you manage the apartment's facilities.

Perhaps the most surprising stand at TGS 2017 was a hulking structure given over to the year's breakout hit, *Playerunknown's Battlegrounds*, which has proven as popular in Japan as it has everywhere else. The South Korean electronics giant Samsung even sponsored a major eSports festival around the game, with 40 players including Japanese celebrities fighting it



ABOVE **Square Enix's commitment to cross-media storytelling continues unimpeded when, in December, a reading of a new side-story set within the *Dissidia* universe will take place in Tokyo.** LEFT **As well as support for 4K resolution screens, *Okami*'s budget re-release reinstates the original's interactive loading screens (later removed from the PS3 update), allowing players to once again earn bonus in-game items during downtime.** BELOW ***Left Alive*'s disposal of the *Front Mission* moniker is no great surprise; the series title was a hangover from a former era of less rigorous localisation, one with curious connotations for the native English speaker**

out in the game's bucolic take on Battle Royale. Other than *PUBG*, *Street Fighter V* provided the only other major eSports draw at the show, with Capcom holding a special tournament in honour of the game's 30th anniversary, an eight-player exhibition with a modest $9,000 prize pot won by Naoki 'Nemo' Nemoto. No official news, however, on the rumoured release of an arcade version of *Street Fighter V*, the first mainline game in the series not to appear in coin-op guise – evidence that not all of Japan's past glories are quite ready to be revisited. ■



Grow your own

In a tiny indie studio in Berlin, a deep simulation MMO is forming the next big virtual world

Community is an important concept for Klang Games. Little wonder: there are just 13 staff working on the studio's latest and most ambitious title, *Seed*. Massively multiplayer online games are famously time-consuming development projects, but the team at Klang is looking to have its new simulation MMO finished in just two years. It's quite the goal, considering its complexity. At first, our demo appears to be *Runescape*'s more stylish sibling, with a tight-knit colony of tiny citizens breaking rocks and chopping wood in a charmingly low-poly forest. Then we notice the stat breakdown for one of them. 'Blood filtration' certainly wasn't a factor in *The Sims*.

As that implies, Klang is committed to creating a detailed human simulation. "We started thinking about this game probably ten years ago," CEO **Mundi Vondi** tells us. "We were always obsessed with making the next deep, immersive MMO – the *ultimate* MMO." Vondi's co-founders previously worked at CCP Games, and so the starting point for *Seed* was, inevitably, the Icelandic studio's spacebound MMO *Eve Online*. "The way we started to think was, 'How can we make this game more persistent, more accessible and easier to play for people who don't normally have eight hours a day to spare?'" The answer to their question lay in Improbable's remarkable SpatialOS, previously featured in **E**306.

The cloud-based platform is designed to allow small teams of developers to build huge, persistent worlds with various game engines and over multiple servers. Klang jumped at the opportunity to use it.

The key to keeping *Seed* accessible, Vondi says, is having it run autonomously, regardless of whether it's being played: "You can have a full day job, or hang out with friends, and when you check in, the game is going to be there playing itself. That allows you to jump right in." The result is a realtime strategy title populated by AI entities that – if kept relatively cheerful and sane – will eat, breathe, farm, sleep, interact and reproduce all by themselves, unless prompted otherwise by the omnipotent player. *Seed* hopes to be an MMO without all the grinding to get to the good bits: Klang's belief is that the fun should come from loftier goals.

Seed's main draw is creating your own in-game communities that will cross over and interact with those of other players. When Vondi met Lawrence Lessig, the Roy L Furman professor of law at Harvard University, at a dinner, it seemed like the ideal chance to collaborate – to Lessig, at least. "He said, 'You have all these autonomous agents that could abide to a legal or political system. But have you really thought that through?' And I was like, 'Er… yes and no.'" Lessig insisted they met the following week. "He was totally into it. I didn't really know why we were meeting or where he was going with it, but he said, 'I want to work on the game!' I was so surprised."

> If you deign to make wearing red hats punishable by death, you can do so, provided you've got support

Together, Lessig and the team at Klang are designing a framework around which players can integrate a political infrastructure into their virtual communities. "When a community starts, it's basically anarchy," says Vondi. "There is no leader, no law, no taxation: nothing other than players and AI, just living there next to each other. When you hit a certain size, players can create a constitution. You can select from a number of templates – an elected representative democracy, or a monarchy, for example – or start with everything empty and fully customise everything." A week later, other players can propose their own constitutions as well, before a public vote is held to decide which becomes law. A similar system dictates the legal boundaries of *Seed*'s communities, where if you deign to make wearing red hats punishable by death, you can do so, provided you've got enough support.


Mundi Vondi, CEO and co-founder, Klang Games

"I could never even have scratched the surface without [Lessig], because he knows politics and law inside-out," says Vondi. "There are so many little pieces that have to make sense and fit together. We're building a tool which allows players to come up with different types of government. There's a real-world value here: we'll have thousands of different communities, various political structures, and all kinds of data to study."

Even if *Seed* doesn't manage to solve the world's many sociopolitical problems when it begins recruiting players early next year, its simulation is, despite the subject matter, an intriguing proposition. Why are we all so obsessed with recreating humanity so absolutely? Vondi's reply is immediate: because we want to feel like we're part of something. "We're all living in the re-creation. When players are pinned up against each other, there are going to be real consequences to any action you take. You'll have to abide by the law. I know I won't have the time to be the big overlord, but I want to just be there – to be this little part of this big community." ■





Seed gets its name from the way in which your characters are dropped into the world – via mysterious, seed-shaped pods from outer space







The endgame will come from emergent activity between different player communities. You may have to deal with characters being kidnapped and held to ransom, for example

INTERACTIVE IMAGINATION

Providing the tools for a game that will create and sustain itself



The future of videogames, according to Vondi, isn't in designing worlds: it's giving a simple, yet robust, system to your players, and letting them do it for you. "Things get complex when players get hold of it. We believe in a hands-off approach, in just letting this thing go nuts. We've seen things on the Internet where people are given simple tools, and go wild." Vondi recalls Reddit's April Fools' experiment, 'Place', a massively multiplayer interactive art canvas. "People could colour one pixel every minute or so, and you'd just have this painting going absolutely AWOL. Those kind of things are really powerful, and that's what we're really going for with *Seed* – trying to touch on that power somehow."

Reality bytes

CCP Newcastle's Andrew Willans on the challenges of 18 months as a VR pioneer

You'll struggle to find a more passionate advocate for VR than **Andrew Willans**. *Eve Valkyrie*'s lead designer left Ubisoft Reflections after seven years, having worked on the likes of *The Crew*, *The Division* and *Watch Dogs*, as well as leading a small team on the delightful *Grow Home*. He moved to CCP Newcastle after being dazzled by an early *Valkyrie* demo, and is still working on the game, some 18 months on from its initial launch. Ahead of his keynote at this year's Develop: VR conference at Olympia London on November 9, Willans spoke to us about his experiences working on one of VR's biggest games.

What's the biggest draw to working in VR?

I think I speak for everyone at the studio that when VR came about it really blew our socks off. We're making games in VR because we genuinely believe that this is a large part of the future of games. For us there's still that sense of wonder and excitement. So that's in the DNA of the studio: we're all wowed by the technology, and we just want to make great games for it. Yeah, we'd be a lot happier if it picked up sooner than it did, but we're here for the long haul. As the technology improves, as the prices come down and it becomes more widely available to more players, then that's only going to be happy days for us.

> "We're making games in VR because we believe that this is a large part of the future of games"

You're in the unusual position of running a live VR game. With no real precedent to draw from, how have you handled that?

Well, I'd be a liar if I said there wasn't an element of seat-of-your-pants to it, as there always is with any online game (laughs). But CCP has a really strong pedigree with community interaction, so we adopted a similar approach with *Valkyrie*. We had our early adopters programme – they were with us through the beta period, through the early release on Oculus, and then obviously when PlayStation VR came online. It was really important to have that constant line of dialogue going to make sure we got things right.

What are the biggest challenges?

We learned an absolute ton about UI design in particular. We did lots of research into comfortable viewing distances and what I would call the cone of focus – where you place things within a scene to draw players' attention. And then as they shift that attention, how to then lay the focus on the information that you want to present. I think we're on probably the fifth or sixth iteration of our UI and menus, which is quite a lot in a short period of time. But it was essential – as we brought online more and more features, we needed to use more of this seemingly infinite space. Of course it's not actually infinite space, because even in VR there's lots of visual noise, so it's about how we show players that something's really important.

Are there any unexpected problems you've had to solve?

It sounds a bit grim, but one thing we looked at was how a player dies in VR. On *Valkyrie* we have a safety net, being in a spaceship: the cockpit shatters, but you're behind that screen, so you get a pause when space rushes in and your hands freeze over, rather than a firstperson shooter where you hear the headshot and then bang, you're dead and it's quite brutal and jarring. We made sure the death sequence itself was tuned for comfort, so there's a pause for thought as you're beamed back to the clone vat and then launched back out. We allow you that little inbreath before we fly you back out the launch tube and you get that slap-in-the-face adrenaline fix.



***EVE Valkyrie* lead designer Andrew Willans has now been at CCP Newcastle for two and a half years**

What do you think still needs addressing in VR games?

I don't think we've solved bipedal locomotion. Some games have come incredibly close to doing comfortable movement, but we're still not quite there. I would still say that seated VR experiences are the best, because they naturally match your body's own position, so if you're in a cockpit or the seat of a racing car, it feels comfortable, and so you can use more extreme manoeuvres to create much more exciting scenarios.

And what else have you learned about VR in general?

Since the early days, my head's kind of reset to what's going to really have the best sense of immersion and presence. At first, I thought, well, it's you, looking through the eyes of an avatar. And I think we know now that that's not necessarily true. Thirdperson games, platformers, puzzle games – you can do all of these things in amazing and compelling ways. I'm a lot more comfortable that VR will not be pigeonholed as 'you are your avatar', and that's it. I think there are enough quality games and ideas to prove that's not a limitation. ■



Player comfort has been a key concern. The natural instinct to reach for the right analogue stick to look around led some to initiate a stomach-churning barrel roll before they had their VR legs. It's since gone, though players who've acclimatised can reactivate it for smoother evasive manoeuvring

VIRTUAL GENEALITY

Why VR players seem to be a friendlier bunch



Interactions in VR, Willans reckons, feel more meaningful than regular videogames, and may even be helping to create a more welcoming online environment. A few months ago, CCP Newcastle added rainbow trails to *Valkyrie* – which prompted some members of the game's community to call a temporary ceasefire and indulge in some formation flying instead. "One of the early misconceptions of VR was that it wouldn't be a social experience," Willans says. "But the most successful, impactful games really are."

FANTASTIC CONTRAPTION

Swiss indie studio Okomotive's vehicular adventure puts a positive spin on the post-apocalypse

There's something strangely human about this mechanical mobile home – but here, at the end of the world, it's the only friend our tiny pac-a-mac-sporting hero has left. "The feeling of loneliness is an integral part of the game," says **Don Schmocker**, Okomotive co-founder and creative lead on *Far: Lone Sails*. "The world you are travelling is vast and barren, and your character is miniscule in comparison." Environments are charcoal swathes of moody sky and ruin, accented with hints of instructive colour. Stephen Biesty's book, Incredible Cross-Sections, inspired how players can peek inside at the doll-like scene as they scurry the red-coated driver around, fuelling and fixing via buttons, lifts and fire hoses.

The journey across the dried-up ocean floor is mostly about your relationship with the giant hybrid machine. "The interdependency plays a major role in making the vehicle feel alive," Schmocker says. "It is your safe spot, it provides shelter from menacing weather conditions, you can collect memorabilia inside it, and marvel at its evolutions over the course of your journey. Even if it may be a bit capricious sometimes, it still feels natural that you need to look after it and tend to its needs. Without it, all hope of finding answers would be lost."

It is also, Schmocker says, about forward momentum. "The atmosphere is eerie and may appear depressing, but it is never without hope: moving forward instead of staying deadlocked suggests that there may still be something out there worth the risk." We'll know for sure in February, when *Far: Lone Sails* releases on PC and Mac. ■





Far: Lone Sails is "an experiment in altering the role of vehicles in games," says Schmocker, whose influences range from Das Boot and Mad Max to Theo Jansen's 'strandbeest' kinetic sculptures

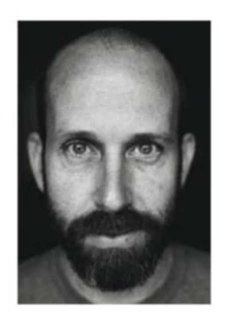
Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"He's a propagator of **despicable garbage** that does real damage to the culture around this industry."

Campo Santo's **Sean Vanaman**, after issuing a DMCA takedown on YouTube megastar Pewdiepie's *Firewatch* videos



"When you spend as much time as we do together, in the **pressure cooker** of creative work and deadlines, you really get to know a person."

Exactly, now former Naughty Dog creative director **Bruce Straley**. That's why we got rid of [redacted]



"I can be very cocky and very brash on social media. I'm going to continue to iterate on this game… and try to be **less of a dick**."

Cliff Bleszinski vows to change the habit of a lifetime in a bid to save *Lawbreakers*

"You can't retroactively say, 'I'm revoking this licence because **you are racist garbage**,' or whatever. That's not how DMCA works."



Indeed, **Felix 'Pewdiepie' Kjellberg**. Except, you know, it actually is

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Dark Presence
Developer Galloping Ghost Productions

First announced all the way back in 2008, the smart money was on this unnecessarily ambitious 2D fighting game having long since gone the way of the dodo. Yet *Dark Presence*, which is being made by a development studio set up by Galloping Ghost, an arcade in Brookfield, Illinois (which, with over 400 games, is one of the biggest in the US), is somehow very much alive.

OK, it doesn't look like much. Indeed, its digitised sprites do not exactly scream 2017, instead calling back to the likes of *Pit Fighter* and *Mortal Kombat* (understandably, Galloping Ghost prefers the latter comparison). Yet beneath the mid-'90s aesthetic is a fighting game of baffling, staggering complexity. Actors have been fully performance captured in remarkable detail, with every character fighting every other character to ensure each battle feels distinct. Oh, and they've done it with each fighter on the player one and player two sides, with none of the sprite flipping found in other games. Oh, and there's a stance system, tied both to screen sides and health bars (when a bar is almost empty, the character enters a 'Not Well' state).

The result? Seventeen thousand frames of animation per character, five years on a capture set, and a game whose final filesize may run to an entire terabyte. A console port doesn't seem especially likely; then again, neither does the game itself, but nearly ten years later Galloping Ghost's enthusiasm appears undimmed. Risky, ludicrously expensive and mad as a brush, it's the kind of thing we thought was long gone from the arcade scene – and not just because it reminds us of *Pit Fighter*. Commendably bonkers stuff.



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a year in videogames
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My Favourite Game
Daniel Avery

The DJ and producer waxes on about Nintendo consoles and the link between game music and techno

Daniel Avery is a DJ and producer based in London, frequently listed among the top DJs in the underground club scene. He has recorded mixes for Fabric and DJ-Kicks and produced his own dance album, Drone Logic. With new music set to release soon, he takes time out of the studio to talk about his *other* enduring passion.

What was the first game you played?
It was definitely *Super Mario Bros* on the NES round my friend's house. Being in that room is one of my earliest memories. Seeing my obsession with it all, my parents bought me a SNES with *Super Mario World* for my birthday. That was back in 1992. I've still got it.

Did that put you in the Nintendo camp?
I dug it all really. My friend had a Mega Drive and then a Saturn, which we played for days. I loved the PlayStation but I've probably poured more hours into the N64 than any other console. All the systems felt entirely different back then.

Games were a big obsession of yours growing up, then?
Yeah; games, football and music. My first job was in an import game shop in Bournemouth called Video Game Centre, so it was very much a part of my youth. It opened around 1991 and amassed an amazing collection of stuff over its time. The owner would often drive to London to meet new arrivals off the plane from Japan whilst the shop stayed open late into the night. Those were really happy, funny times for me. They gave me a Super Famicom Jr as a leaving present when I went to university which I also still have, alongside a pretty dedicated collection of games.

PHANTASY ZONE
Avery began DJing in his hometown of Bournemouth before landing a residency at legendary London club Fabric. Not content with just playing records, he began remixing the likes of Metronomy, The Horrors and Death From Above 1979, eventually establishing his signature brand of cosmic-drone techno. He signed to label Phantasy Sound, releasing his debut album Drone Logic in 2013. He will be playing along with The Chemical Brothers at Manchester's The Warehouse Project in December. Find out more about his music and touring dates at danielavery.co.uk.



How did you get into DJing?
I didn't grow up listening to dance music. I mean, I loved electronic acts like Björk and Aphex Twin but I in no way connected them to dance music. To a kid in Bournemouth, clubs were all about shit music for blokes in CK One – I had no interest in that world. It was only when I discovered this one tiny underground night, where they'd play Joy Division and krautrock next to electronic records, that it all made sense. I felt like I'd found a new home. After hanging around for long enough, they asked if I wanted to open the night one time and that was my first DJ gig. I played every week after that.

"I've played Street Fighter II more than any other game by a massive margin"

Did you also plan to make your own music?
I'd been making some noisy shoegaze stuff on a 4-track in my bedroom for a couple of years by this point but I had no idea how to finish anything. I had no intention of making any music that could be played in a club. It was only when I moved to London that things changed. I was working in a record shop so I met a lot of bands and managers. Some of them asked if I wanted to try a remix; it was how I cut my teeth. After a couple of years, I felt I was finding my own voice. A few of the tracks found their way to Andrew Weatherall, who started playing them, and things began to move for me.

Did music in games have any influence on your own music?
I like the link between early game music and techno. That idea of having to create memorable moments out of very little; making the most of what you have. Of course I didn't realise this as a youngster but it's something I've come to appreciate over time. Saying that, I think *Streets Of Rage* sunk in pretty deep.

Would you ever consider writing music for a game?
If the right thing came along then absolutely. It's definitely something I'd like to explore.

Do you still get time to play games?
Not really, but the Switch has been something of a revelation. That's always in the bag now.

OK then – what is your all-time favourite game?
I'm into creative processes that embrace the old and the new in equal measure. For me, that's when interesting things can occur. All the games that have stayed with me in my life have shared something: *A Link To The Past*, *Mario 64*, *Metal Gear Solid*, *Shenmue*, *Resident Evil 4*, *Journey*… they all felt familiar and new at the same time. But honestly, I've played *Street Fighter II* more than any other game by a massive margin. It's the definition of beautiful simplicity. Over 25 years on I'm nowhere near bored of it. I still find myself humming Guile's theme as I walk through airports. ■



Avery was excited for *Street Fighter V*, but the lack of an Arcade mode led him to a brutal realisation: "When it comes to playing practised people online, I am fucking rubbish"

WEBSITE
Destiny Item Manager
bit.ly/destinyim

Anyone who played the first *Destiny* will have heard of Destiny Item Manager, a thirdparty browser extension so feature-rich it made Bungie's own effort look like macaroni art. Thankfully, it's back in time for *Destiny 2*. It features a drag-and-drop UI, allowing you to swiftly move items from storage to your inventory at any time. Forgot to bring your trusty exotic fusion rifle to the raid? With a laptop or phone at your side, you can pluck it from your vault at will. DIM can search for duplicates, find fuel for infusions and auto-equip items to push you to your highest Power level. It even marks legendary-mod guns with gold borders to prevent wasteful dismantling. The app is still yet to be updated, but it works in mobile Chrome, and given the DIM team are doing all this for free, we'll let them off.



VIDEO
World Record Progression: Half-Life 2
bit.ly/hl2wr

Part of a series by YouTube user Summoning Salt, this history of *Half-Life 2* speedruns charts the evolutions in skips and glitches exploited by Freemans over the years. Early strategies see NPCs chivvied along during cutscenes by dropping barrels on their heads to teleport them, while later runs rely on prop-flying and perfect execution to whittle down completion time. But it's the insight into the community that's most fun: tales of fierce competition, speedrunner habits of arbitrary goal-setting, the agony of near-misses and the ecstasy of finally besting the numbers.

WEB GAME
Like Roots In The Soil
bit.ly/rootssoil

Like Roots In The Soil is a walking simulator where you don't control the walking. Instead, you use the mouse to smoothly spin the scene, revealing two people walking along the same road – in different time-frames. From one angle, a grizzled man limps through a ruined city with a shotgun and a plant in a tin can. From another, a boy follows in those footsteps, surrounded by a pastel-perfect world of modern amenities. Rotating between the journeys suggests some historical disaster: a transport system destroyed, then humming, the clear twang of one score warping into a stranger tone on the other side. The writing feels heavy-handed, however: the experience hardly needs words, with an emotive ending that ties the two timelines together via one simple, silent act of hope.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

BOOK
Sega Dreamcast: Collected Works
bit.ly/dreamcastbook

Produced in collaboration with Sega and successfully Kickstarted, this deluxe hardback compendium celebrates all things Dreamcast. Photography of rare hardware, never-before-seen development materials, retrospective essays on titles such as *Shenmue*, *Crazy Taxi* and *Jet Set Radio* – much is packed between its 300 (approximate) pages. Regular **Edge** contributor Simon Parkin is currently conducting interviews with original Dreamcast developers for the book, including Naoto Ohshima and Tetsuya Mizuguchi. Those who have already snapped up special editions can look forward to hand-screened slipcases. If you've missed out entirely, don't worry: like older brother Sega Mega Drive: Collected Works, this will likely appear in Read-Only Memory's online store at a later date.



continue

Starting block
Arms gets remappable controls at last. Time to put your guard up

Unknown quantity
PUBG overtakes *Dota 2* for most concurrent players on Steam

Golf clap
An NES game hidden in Switch pays delightful tribute to Iwata

Coronation treat
Epic wins the *PUBG* race with free standalone game *Fortnite Battle*

quit

Gloves off
A hate symbol on *Destiny 2* gauntlets makes it through QA

Graph gaffe
Valve's solution to Steam review bombing? *Charts*

Born to die
That other colourful hero shooter admits defeat: no more *Battleborn*

Cross platforms
PS4 and Xbox owners play *Fortnite* together; Epic nerfs the 'error'



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TWEETS

D2's warlock + balanced glide + wing armor = my recurring childhood dream, where I could 'fly' in mad, unsteady bursts. Strange nostalgia.
Jordan Thomas @nullspeak
Director, *Bioshock 2*

Current status: listening to @romero swear at *Thomas Was Alone*.
Brenda Romero @br
Game designer

Every game should be free to play, but you can pay $1 to send a small electric shock to the game developer.
Ben Esposito @torahhorse
Creator, *Donut County*

There is something weirdly human about thousands of people mourning the death of a spacecraft for our own advancement.
Jennifer Scheurle @Gaohmee
Design lead, *Earthlight*





ALAN WAKE'S
AMERICAN NIGHTMARE
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DISPATCHES DECEMBER



Issue 311

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



PlayStation.Plus

No one gets the prize

After picking up a Switch shortly after launch and being very happy with it so far (*Zelda* on the toilet!) I came to realise there was something missing: trophies. While I certainly don't consider myself a trophy enthusiast – I only have two platinums out of a library of 40 or so PS4 games – they were very much noticeable by their absence and I was happy to hear the news that Nintendo were looking to introduce something similar in the near future.

While trophies (or achievements, for my Xbox brethren) are decisive amongst core gamers, I think we can all agree they can enhance a gaming experience when implemented correctly. They can also instil brand loyalty: a close friend of mine couldn't bring himself to get the PS4 over the Xbox One because of his gamerscore on Xbox 360. He now plays by himself.

Imagine a trophy list for *Breath Of The Wild* that encourages experimental play. I was very conservative for the first 20 or so hours before realising that the game truly lives up to the term sandbox. Think of how many people played through the whole game without any clue as to what is possible. How about the rewards you could earn though winning trophies? This could be the new Club Nintendo, with wallpapers and screen savers for the more casual and maybe even Amiibos for the most dedicated.

And finally, I would love to see trophy support added to games on Virtual Console. I would begrudge shelling out for *Super Mario 64* for the fourth time a lot less if it gave me new challenges to achieve.

Phil Eggins

Well, look. Some of us like the fact that we can just play a game without our progress being tracked and measured in often rote, arbitrary ways. Like this Mike fellow:

The hustle

The Switch is a magnificent console, and far from being my 'second' gaming device as I thought it would be, it has left my PS4 gathering dust. Obviously *Zelda* is key here, but other titles such as *Arms* and *Splatoon 2* have also kept me thoroughly entertained. It's that unique 'Nintendo difference' that people tend to mention. Nintendo's refusal to follow industry norms has also been more charming than frustrating to me – aside from the whole voice chat thing.

However, recent rumours of a trophy or achievements system have me worried. Many have been crying out for this for a long time, but the hunt for trophies has often meant deviating from the core experience I wanted in the first place. Rather than enjoy the narrative and action of the *Uncharted* games, I run around looking for treasures knowing full well I'll never find them all. I hate myself for it, but I can't stop. The only platinum trophy I ever got was for *Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit*, which involved making friends with people I have never had any kind of interaction with since, and taking a picture of a certain car at night. I heard the chime of the platinum, but it rang hollow.

> "The hunt for trophies has often meant deviating from the core experience I wanted"

It's a personal problem in many ways, but how many others feel the same as me? *Breath Of The Wild* was an absolutely fantastic and absorbing adventure which didn't need trophies to artificially extend its lifespan. Korok seeds should keep completionists busy enough. I hope we don't start seeing trophies in Nintendo games for trivial achievements that distract me from the main event.

Mike Watson

If we have to pick a side, we're on yours. Achievements are brilliant when done well – but they so rarely are. Sadly, your new PS Plus subscription will introduce you to a year's worth of additional trophies. Sorry.



Got to be real

Transgender protagonists are a rarity in videogames, just kidding, they don't exist. It saddens me that a medium so dependent on the idea of choice has so far failed to recognise an oppressed minority who just wants their choice recognised. To assume this is a conscious decision in the games industry would be rash. So far I don't believe the lack of transgender protagonists, or characters for that matter, come from malice. On the contrary we've seen some encouraging signs. Recently *The Sims 4* introduced a gender-fluid system where your sim's ability to have a child does not depend on their chosen gender. Gender is a choice, and it's time the game industry at large recognised that. The time has come for a big-budget game, a la *Uncharted* or *Overwatch*, to star a transgender character. Failing to do this would be a blow to the transgender community, and the LGBT movement at large. Over and over videogames have shown us the power of choice – it's time for them to take the next step.
Seth Draeger

We don't doubt it's happening behind the scenes, but these things take time. Once one studio does it well, others will surely follow.

Baby love

A recent letter to **Edge** suggested that the magazine would benefit from some new features. You're all too busy playing the SNES Mini to think about mundanities like that, so I have some suggestions for you.

We all know at least one idiot voted for Brexit because they believed the bus that said leaving the EU would fund £350m per week towards *Half-Life 3*: how about an ongoing feature on the development of the game until Valve get so annoyed that they have no choice but release it?

Another idea: more features on the pixels of parenting. We are expecting a new baby in October, and so it would be ideal to have a rundown of games that can be played one-handed while bottle-feeding, and also the do's and don'ts of playing VR while holding a newborn. (Interesting fact: we haven't need to buy a playpen because I've got enough raw materials to create one with stacks of **Edge** magazines). Finally, how about staff writer profile pages? Your likes, dislikes and a big, smiley photo. You may as well do it now while you can, because **Edge** will eventually be written by AI anyway.

I'll be sticking with you regardless. As our baby grows bigger and bigger, the "Future of Interactive Entertainment" playpen is going to need higher walls.
Ben Bulbeck

Thanks, Ben, for that succession of quite terrible ideas. Except the *Half-Life 3* thing, anyway. It's mad, yes, but it might just work.

Don't leave me this way

I am now in my early 40s, and have in the last year or so fallen out of love with gaming in general. It started slowly in a creeping fashion; even the games I love just did not give me the same thrill and enjoyment as before. I've been gaming since I was 12 with the Amstrad PCW with *Head Over Heels*, having to play using the keyboard, me and my brother struggling – we never even knew about joysticks at the time. We never did complete it, even though I printed out a walkthrough from Amstrad Action magazine. It didn't help: you had to do it all in one sitting as you couldn't save. The golden days.
Daniel Chambers

We'll keep this brief, Daniel: head to p98.

I thought it was you

A few months back in **E**304, I lamented the fact that a frantic, slightly unhinged Nintendo was a poor standard bearer for the company's hometown of Kyoto, the restrained and peaceful Old Capital of Japan. My opinion has now changed. I have come to regard the emptiness of retail spaces allocated to Switch products as having an almost zen-like quality, the rows of bare shelves, sparsely and randomly punctuated by the odd physical copy of *Puyo Puyo Tetris*, seemingly aspiring to the nihilistic poignancy of a stone garden.

At this point the reader might be excused for believing that I'm being sarcastic, and I wouldn't go as far as saying that they would be entirely mistaken. However, there is also genuine appreciation in my comment. I am fed up of the uninterrupted hail of new titles competing for my attention (and spare income) on other platforms. It would be okay if they were just short little games that could be completed in a few hours, but many are enormous beasts: triple-A behemoths that require true dedication to be fully appreciated. As a result, and with a few notable exceptions – such as the sadly underrated *Mirror's Edge Catalyst* – I usually end up losing interest after having completed 10 or 20 per cent of the main story arc. Let's not even talk about side-quests.

In contrast, the scarcity of new titles reaching Nintendo's latest console almost feels like a blessing. Every new release is like a small event, worthy of notice if not necessarily fireworks. Faced with the lack of alternatives, I even ended up giving *Splatoon 2* a spin and thoroughly enjoyed it, despite my usual loathing of shooters. So, I think the guys from Kyoto may be wiser than I realised: every Switch game is what a delicious otoro nigiri is to a tempura buffet, something to be savoured and remembered instead of wolfed down and forgotten.

Now if we could still work on these bubble-gum aesthetics and produce something more mature for adult gamers who don't have a toddler regression fetish, I'm sure we'd be onto something.
Fabrice Saffre

There's something to be said about a nice, steady flow of new releases, rather than the constant tsunami found elsewhere. Speaking of which, it's review season, and the mailbag is bulging. Please, someone, send help. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

Can videogames be educational? The question is as old as videogames themselves, and it depends what you mean. One of my favourite toys as a young child was my Dataman, made by Texas Instruments: it was a futuristic-looking grey handheld console that essentially gamified mental arithmetic, flashing up sums on the blue LED display and asking the player to input the answer via the number keys. As a tiny nerd I became obsessed with getting perfect scores as fast as possible. After months of this I got very good at mental arithmetic, but then that was exactly what the Dataman was training. It was basically an interactive calculator.

The question gets more complex when we consider current discussions about the use of videogames as educational aids in schools. Sure, you can dump a lot of factual information into a game format, but questions remain as to how much the user actually retains as working knowledge afterwards. One way in which many people think that videogames can do something that print media can't, however, is in their simulation of systems: by reacting to player inputs, the game can demonstrate how the parts of complex systems interact.

One very complex system whose operations mean a great deal to everyone on the planet, of course, is the climate. Global warming is the result of human inputs into a vastly complex interconnected web of systems, the best supercomputer models of which are still, of necessity, simplifications. In a time when President Trump has ordered his own environmental agency to delete all reference to the phenomenon, maybe wider grassroots education about the problem is in order. And maybe videogames, being particularly good at helping us understand systems, can help.

That, at least, is the possibility addressed by a fascinating recent paper by Tania Ouariachi Peralta, María Dolores Olvera Lobo and José Gutiérrez Pérez from the University of Granada in Spain. The researchers explore a suite of games on the theme of global warming and subject them to an interesting set of analyses, cross-validated with a global panel of experts in climate science, science communication and environmental education. They conclude optimistically that such games can improve climate education because, in them, "causes are made visible, actions are portrayed as local, uncertainty is avoided, contextualised information is provided in a positive and proactive tone, and a critical thinking approach is encouraged through decision-making."



Illustration kaeru.com.ar

The danger is that educational videogames are teaching exactly the wrong thing

There is, however, a potential problem here, and one that may even be inherent in the videogame form itself. In videogames, regardless of genre, the individual player has an exaggerated, superhuman ability to change the course of events compared with the agency we actually have as individuals in our own lives — even compared to the agency that Donald Trump has, in the face of a recalcitrant Congress. The researchers make approving mention of a game entitled *Act On Your Consumption*, "where the character Eva suggests that the player look around to check how many items are made of plastic in order to encourage the player to reflect upon how they could be replaced. She also encourages the player to write down his or her own plans for a sustainable diet and low-CO_2 mobility." This is a fine thing to do and would no doubt make the player feel better, as well as contributing in a tiny way to the improvement of her immediate environment. But is it going to stop global warming? No it isn't. Local action by well-meaning people is not going to stop sea-level rises and increasingly frequent hurricanes: that is why we need politics, and decisions at the level of national governments, and international agreements such as the Paris accord.

Some of the other games examined by the researchers at least transcend the level of the single human by giving the player the role of a city manager or explicitly an 'ecological superhero', but by their very form they all imply that a single person can make a difference. The danger here, then, is that educational videogames which reduce a global, interconnected problem to the solipsistic universe of the single player are teaching exactly the wrong thing: they are encouraging a kind of complacent feeling of virtuous superiority. You can get good at sums on your own, but to address a challenge like global warming will take the greatest massively multiplayer action ever seen.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

Here comes *Destiny* again, then, and with it goes a chunk of my life. My wife now understands that our evenings together have a fixed finish time so I can link up with the raid group without keeping everyone hanging around; I was 20 minutes late last night, and got the kind of reaction from the gang that you'd expect if you'd just needlessly messed up on the final boss for the 30th time in a row. Everyone has to agree on a time, working their actual lives around their virtual ones. All of us have commitments in the boring real world, and so punctuality in *Destiny* is in many ways as important as being able to shoot straight.

While I played the best part of 1,000 hours of *Destiny*, I haven't had this sort of regular, nightly relationship with the game for a while. And so I'd sort of forgotten how it takes over; not just in terms of the withering glances I get from my wife when I tell her it's *Destiny* time, or in the way I spend the day idly thinking about how strategies might be subtly refined. Committing to a game like this means following its schedule; doing things as they become available, or before they run out.

There's a lot more to do in *Destiny 2* than there was in its predecessor, so I'm still trying to work out how it's all going to fit. But Tuesday's the day of the weekly reset, so there'll always be at least one run at the raid, on my main character, that evening. In the event we can get clear times down to an hour or so, as we have with previous raids, maybe we can squeeze in a run on one of the alts. Then there's the weekly Nightfall strike to run on all three characters – one on Tuesday if we've been efficient in the raid. Wednesday and Thursday will be spent mopping up those, then ticking off *Destiny 2*'s other activities that yield level-raising gear. That lot's enough to keep me going until Friday, when Xur, the wandering, tentacle-faced vendor, turns up with an overcoat lined with shiny exotic guns, and Trials Of The Nine, the frighteningly competitive weekend PvP mode, kicks off. Maybe by Sunday or Monday evening I'll have run out of things to do, and can simply play the game for – gasp! – *fun*.



Illustration **kaeru.com.ar**

The best way of keeping a game off the trade-in pile is to build an ecosystem around it to ensure steady engagement

Obviously I enjoy the game – I adore it, in fact, and wouldn't go through all of this if I didn't – but *Destiny* is structured in such a way that the most efficient way of playing it is to go all in: to have three characters and play for at least a couple of hours a night. It's mad, really, but it's far from the only game to do it, nor is it the sole game of its kind in my life. *Puzzle & Dragons* makes materials used in evolving your powerful monsters available in dungeons that only appear one day per week; a specific evolution might require a drop from a daily dungeon that could take a couple of months to come up in the rotation. There have long been games that have encouraged a daily routine – *Animal Crossing* is the obvious one – but increasingly games are being designed around the concept of having you log in every day and giving you something different to do each time.

There are merits to that, of course, and developers' motivations are obvious – even noble. The best way of keeping a game off the trade-in pile is to build an ecosystem around it to ensure steady engagement, and the most straightforward way of doing that is by building a schedule, staggering your content drops and refreshes over the course of the week. Thanks to mobile games, daily active users, or DAU, is one of the most important measures of a game's success. No wonder that our relationships with such games increasingly resemble a school timetable.

There's homework, too. I'll frequently look up *Puzzle & Dragons* dungeon details on thirdparty websites before they launch, planning ahead, teambuilding and theorycrafting so I can hopefully clear them quickly when they arrive. My phone buzzes with messages from the *Destiny* crew throughout the day, working out who's available, what time we're going to meet, and who we can sub in if someone's not around.

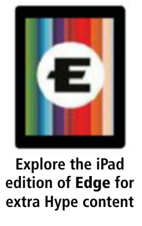
At times you wonder whether it's all getting a bit much. In and amongst all this I also need to be a husband, father and magazine editor. I have plenty of other games I ought to play. And at some point, I really need to get some sleep. You worry that maybe a hobby is becoming a habit; that a pastime is starting to resemble a profession. And now I think of it, perhaps a monthly column is transforming into a four-weekly cry for help. Still, there's no time to worry about that right now. It's *Destiny 2* reset tomorrow, and I've tons still left to do.

Nathan Brown is **Edge***'s editor. Due to time constraints, this page was written exclusively during* Destiny 2 *loading screens*

#312

HYPE

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

Hooked on a feeling

Everyone, at some point or another, has been emotionally manipulated by a videogame. Jubilant cheers; growls of anger; terrified, shameful ebullitions; even the hot prickling of tears. The forthcoming titles we've delved into this month all appear to have a remarkable gift for prompting big reactions.

11bit Studios' previous work suggests post-apocalyptic city-building sim *Frostpunk* (p38) is going to dig its claws into our conscience with every municipal decision we make. May as well book an advance ticket for a round (guilt) trip now, we suppose. On a happier note, *The Crew 2* (p34) has earned its fair share of approving noises recently, thanks to its on-the-fly vehicle-switching mechanic. We're happy to report that an extended demo of Ivory Tower's silly, surreal magic trick sparks as much delight as its premise suggests – although the jury's still out on whether it will be used to its full potential in the final game. And while the universal appeal of racing monster trucks through an Inception-esque open world is clear, it's a very particular kind of person who gets giddy over collectible card games. A story-based expansion for *Gwent: The Witcher Card Game* (p46) might just convert a few non-believers.

As the sequel to Team Meat's infuriatingly difficult twitch platformer, you can probably guess the sort of feeling that *Super Meat Boy Forever* (p50) has been designed to dredge up: the kind of primal, repressed rage bubbling below the surface of anyone who's ever been cut off in traffic, fallen foul of a particularly nasty boss fight or, say, weathered a magazine deadline. There's always the incomparable glee when you emerge victorious, mind. But every so often, there's a sudden lump in your throat that you *weren't* prepared for. This month, it was the childlike cry of the titular being in *Fe* (p42) that knocked us for a loop: we left a beautiful demo, blinking away whatever was starting to cloud our steely critical gaze. Perhaps we're getting soft in our old age.

MOST WANTED

Shin Yakuza PS4
Among a host of announcements from Toshihiro Nagoshi and team, this spin-off is the most intriguing. Taking over from Kazuma Kiryu is Ichiban Kasuga, who bears a curious resemblance to footballer Marouane Fellaini. We expect elbows to feature heavily in his fighting style.

Middle-earth: Shadow Of War
PC, PS4, Xbox One
A recent demo involving a Nemesis Fortress raid, coupled with review code arriving too late for this issue, means we're now itching to get our hands on the sequel and around the throats of any orc that dares to hold a grudge against us.

The Last Of Us II PS4
Bruce Straley's departure will undoubtedly leave a big hole at Naughty Dog, but with the back half of *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy* offering an electrifying reminder of what the studio is capable of, we're more impatient than ever to catch up with Ellie and Joel.



THE CREW 2

A racing sequel where silliness is the wind beneath your wings, wheels and rudders

Developer	Ivory Tower
Publisher	Ubisoft
Format	PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin	France
Release	March 16



***The Crew 2*'s truncated America is a similar size to the original's – driving coast to coast takes 40 minutes – but the variety of vehicles is greater**

TOP LEFT **The motocross track we try has plenty of tight corners and ramps for big air.**
MAIN **Stunt planes aren't fast, but their manoevrability results in our most share-worthy tricks.**
ABOVE **A brief session with an F1 car suggests that, as in the first game, the AI is still slightly too aggressive**

ABOVE **A race around Central Park isn't scored by fastest time, but by longest drifts. Suddenly that floaty handling model is an asset.**
RIGHT **The Fast Fav system lets you pre-set three vehicle types to instantly switch between – and to colour-coordinate, if you so wish**





THE CREW 2



Stephane Beley, creative director

This time, Ivory Tower has its priorities in order. While *The Crew* crammed players into the confines of its po-faced story, at least its follow-up DLC expansion, Wild Run, sprinkled motorbikes and monster trucks into the mix for a sorely needed shot of riotous fun. But the full sequel goes further: with the ability to switch the vehicle you're controlling at any time, in any place – from plane, to boat, to car and back – Ivory Tower's online racing game has now firmly decided to ditch reality in favour of fantasy.

With more moving, flying and wave-skimming parts than ever before, *The Crew 2*'s commitment to seamlessness is an ambitious one. The Fast Fav feature is what allows the vehicle transitions, a quick-access menu that lets you to transform a BMW M4 leaping off a ramp into an upward-soaring set of stunt wings. "It should feel magic," creative director **Stephane Beley** tells us, explaining that this bit of wizardry has long laid dormant in the series. "It was already inside *The Crew*, but only in prototype. We already had this technology of switching between cars on the fly. But it was perceived by players at the time, by Ubisoft and the team, as kind of a cheat. So we decided to keep it for a more long-term vision."

Here it is. As we fly over a shimmering stretch of water in our demo, we spot an activity marker hovering over the waves below: a press of a button later, our plane has melted into a speedboat, which falls from the sky, into the water and zips towards our objective. It is somehow both patently ridiculous and effortlessly functional. "I don't want any moments of frustration for the player," Beley says. "You should be in control at every moment of the switch. With the technology, we try to extrapolate where the vehicle will be if it becomes a plane, or a boat, to maintain the momentum and the fun of the moment."

Indeed, we are able to switch back to our pre-selected BMW while skipping across the water – though this time, the result is a jarring change of scenery, as we're duly teleported to a nearby road. But Ivory Tower has the occasional trick up its sleeve to help players navigate *The Crew 2*'s environments smoothly: unfolding the world beneath your wheels in an Inception-style illusion Beley calls "the bend" during transitions between certain events. But with a group of friends, it's Free Roam mode that is bound to provoke silliness, whether playing car-to-plane chicken on a Miami beach or parking boats atop New York skyscrapers.

Everything is made to ensure nothing gets in the way of the player and a good time, then. Designing *The Crew 2*'s condensed, yet still sprawling, version of America has been a challenge, Beley admits. "A new iteration of the world has to be adapted to fit with the ability to switch anywhere. We recreate collisions in every part of the world just for that moment of the player using Fast Fav." But for Beley and his team, the work is worth it. "It was so powerful during playtests, E3 and Gamescom – finally, this was able to surprise people."

It's a shame, then, that much of *The Crew 2* is familiar for the wrong reasons, particularly the handling. Beley points out that, "We are not between simulation and arcade-style gameplay: this is an arcade game where you should be able to access any type of vehicle and immediately enjoy it." But there's still a looseness to cars, boats and bikes that makes turns hard to consistently judge. And while it's no bad thing for a plane to feel floaty, speeding a sprint boat over the sea is oddly characterless. Equally disappointing are the missions we sample: while F1 races on rain-slicked tracks and frantic motocross events add variety, we can't help but wonder why we're not prompted to use the creatively stimulating vehicle-switching mechanic in any of them.

> ***"You should be able to access any type of vehicle and immediately enjoy it"***

Then again, Ivory Tower is keen to hold back some things. It's reluctant to show much of the redesigned progression system from the first game, which let you upgrade classes of car with collected parts, and the online elements crucial to nurturing a community. We can only hope there's more to come that integrates and celebrates *The Crew 2*'s new mechanic. For now, Beley is just enjoying his ride on the waves it's created. "I made *The Crew 2* to surprise players. Nowadays in the game industry, surprise isn't often present. And if I'm able to create one that will let people have fun, that's perfect for me." ■



Car share

Creative vehicle-switching moments in *The Crew 2* will be prime viral fodder, and Ivory Tower knows it. A new Live Replay feature lets you hit a button, go into an editing suite and play back your last few tricks, automatically recorded for your convenience. You can change the camera angles, cut the clip to your liking, and then directly upload to YouTube. "I wanted to have a tool dedicated to our community and geared towards sharing," Beley says. "First of all, this is a racing game, but the social experience is a second layer. I'm pretty sure that this is the future. It's something I've had in mind from *Test Drive Unlimited* to *The Crew*: this experience of sharing the world online, in vehicles, with friends."



FROSTPUNK

This War Of Mine's developer turns to ice-age city-building

Developer/publisher 11bit Studios
Format PC
Origin Poland
Release 2017

One of our workers is crippled. Frostbitten from his work hauling fuel from the coal piles far outside our city and hungry because the cookhouse ran out of food, he collapsed and was taken to the medical post. But, instead of curing him, the doctor lamed him and now he's unable to work, a burden on our society. The people ask if we should build a care home for him, but the notion is ridiculous. We can't even feed everyone.

Frostpunk is a new city-building strategy game from the studio that developed *This War Of Mine*. It imagines an alternative Victorian Britain which has been stricken by the sudden onset of an ice age, and tasks you with saving your people by building a city for them in the heat thrown from a huge, smoke-belching generator. But as the temperature plunges and resources dwindle, building becomes only half the challenge, since this is a mash-up of the long-term strategising of city-builders such as *Sim City* with the minute-by-minute coping strategies of survival games like *The Long Dark*.

Like *This War Of Mine*, *Frostpunk* explores what people are forced to do when under great stress. "*This War Of Mine* was very much about the different consequences of survival – the human costs," lead designer **Kuba Stokalski** tells us. "We wanted to build on that and the natural way to scale it up was to ask what a society would do if it was faced with survival."

The doctor's mistake was our fault. We decreed that our medics should risk difficult medical procedures in an attempt to cure patients so we could free more of our few beds for the newly sick. The hunger was also our fault. We didn't appoint enough hunters to forage for food, and instead asked them to find steel so we could build a workshop. The cold was our fault, too. Though the temperature had dipped to -40°, we didn't overdrive the generator for fear of putting too much strain on it. Because if the generator fails, we all die.

Mistakes, oversights and best intentions collide and cascade. And now the people are protesting about being bitterly cold, and we must make them a promise that their concerns will be met. But should we promise that we'll make them warm immediately? Or give ourselves more time so we don't risk undermining their faith in our leadership? Now night has come, the workers must rest, and our coal supply is running low.

Despite its name, *Frostpunk* is a sober and thoughtful game in which you don't make evil decisions, or even bad ones. When you choose to make an edict that children can be put to labour, it's for pragmatism. It will relieve the pressure on our adult workers and ensure we can gather more food and build warmer housing so fewer people have to live in ▶



Lead designer Kuba Stokalski previously designed indie 4X game *Spacecom*



Frostpunk began with its high concepts, of an ice age hitting Britain and the image of a giant steam generator, and from there the game's survival idea evolved





Though *Frostpunk* is first releasing for PC, the concentric nature of the city makes console joypad control more than viable

tents. But if a child should be hurt while working, it will have a major effect on the people. Sickness, hunger, cold and death are constants, but the moral effect of your decisions are two gauges, Hope and Discontent. A discontented populace might revolt and hang you. A hopeless one will abandon your city.

"It proves to be a really interesting philosophical area to explore, especially with what's happening right now with different social movements and changes all around the world," says Stokalski. The Victorian setting is an explicit attempt to situate *Frostpunk* within the British Industrial Revolution and among the works of social theory that surrounded it, such as Friedrich Engels' The Condition Of The Working Class In England, and also into modern themes of climate change and the rise of automation.

As the leader of this society, you're faced with a stream of subtle nudges to remember the people who toil beneath you. They'll regularly express their concerns and pose problems for which you'll have to make difficult decisions. If a child is injured in a work accident, you might be asked to review your law. Perhaps you should prohibit child labour again. But then you'll lose productivity. How about limiting them to safe jobs? Maybe that's enough? If the pressure is mounting, however, keeping the children working might be a necessary risk.

You feel for your people as you watch them huddling on the bare ground

Sometimes they'll demand that you make an improvement, such as to end homelessness in the city, which you can opt to make a promise for, either to fix quickly or in a number of days. Effectively mini-quests, these requests often point towards a better way to play, but their delivery also hits an emotional note because they relate to human needs. Sometimes they run counter to your strategy, such as wanting a pub when you're trying to focus on sourcing enough coal for the generator to keep running. "Making sure you might not always agree with what they want is one of the layers that allowed us to put more empathy into the society as a group," says Stokalski. "We built channels for you to empathise with each and every one of them: you know their names, who they are, what they've been through. But when you have 80 people and later on even more, you can't emphasise with them individually, but at the same time we want you to feel emotions for the society as a whole."

You also feel for your people as you watch them huddling on the bare ground next to the generator and trudging to the tasks you've set them, leaving paths through the thick snow. With daylight hours so short, and considering how long it takes for them to get to the stacks of wood and other resources out in the wastes, changing plans can be a disastrous waste of time. The pressure of having too few people, working too slowly, is constant.

***Frostpunk* is a** grim game, a work of moral greyness and pragmatism. But its preoccupation with the people and what it means to have responsibility over them opens a world of nuance which recalls the work of other Polish studios such as CD Projekt Red, maker of the *Witcher* games, which also tackle deeply human stories about what people do when the chips are down. "Maybe it's our history as a people," Stokalski says. "Up until the First World War we had no country of our own, because we were occupied by Russia, Germany and Austro-Hungary. Then there was this brief period of independence, and then the Second World War happened, and then the Communists. Having this in our collective mindset might mean we want to see deeper meanings in what we do. This history reminds us of bad things not long before our modern one that make us question our way of life, our system of values, what's good and bad. That's maybe one of our inspirations."

The result is a game that feels very different to the often US-made city builder and strategy games that came before it. Instead of domination and winning, *Frostpunk* is about the journey you take to ensure the survival of your society, and how you feel about the way you achieved it. Could you have made better decisions? Probably. Was survival at all costs ultimately worth it? That's for you to judge. ■

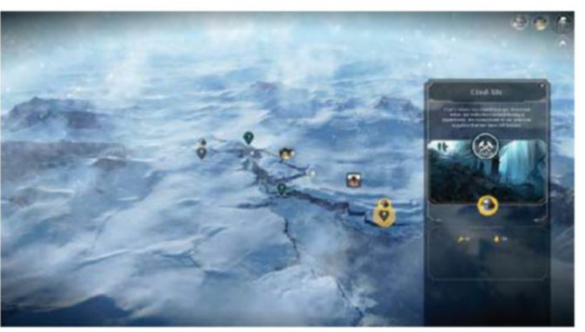




Playing by the rules

The pressure *Frostpunk* applies forces players into hard decisions, but 11bit Studios had to account for every level of player to ensure it scales to them. That has meant a great deal of playtesting, during which Stokalski saw power players breezing through the economical layer, but he also had to ensure less proficient players could also survive. The Book Of Laws was the key, the tradeoffs in its edicts helping to scale back good players and help less-skilled ones. "The most important thing for us is to provide the experience of trying to survive as a society, to show you the lengths people will go to, and we wanted to model that regardless of ability. You will have to make choices, and see how far you are willing to go to survive."

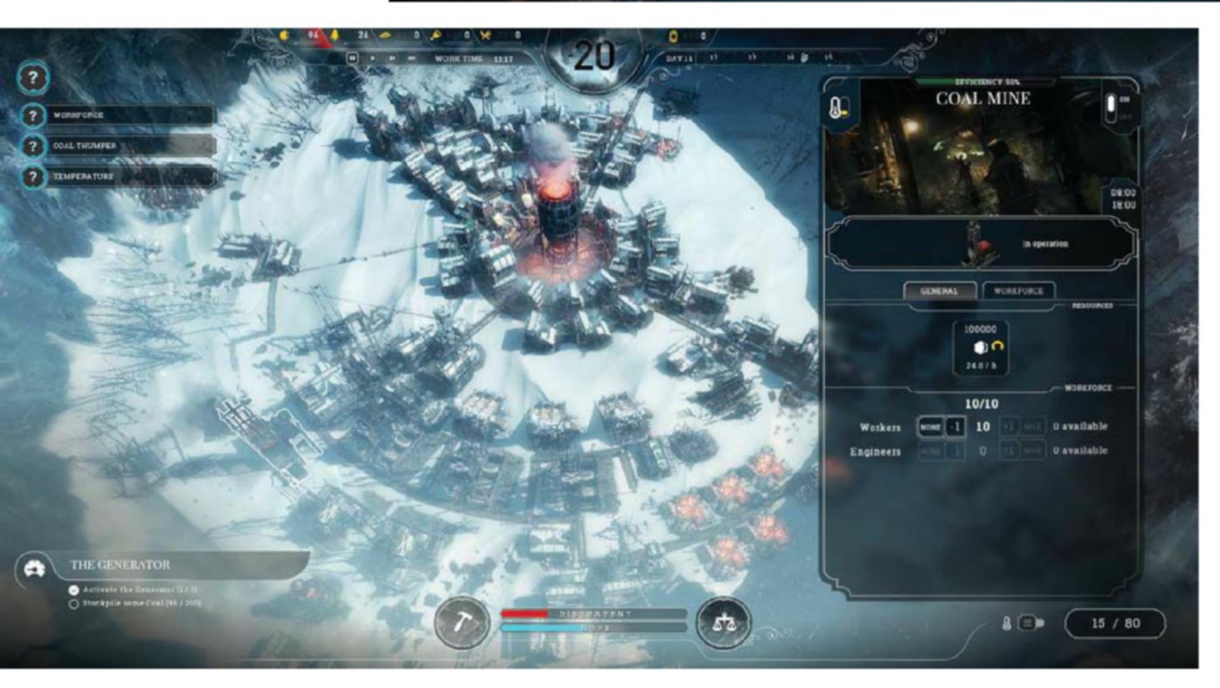






TOP **The city's shape is defined by the warmth thrown by the various generators, and roads you build to resource spots outside.**
ABOVE **The people regularly ask you to make their situation better. Succeed, and you'll make them more hopeful and content**





TOP **Once you build the Outpost you can send expeditions out to find the most valuable resource of them all: people.**
ABOVE **Buildings like the Workshop, where you research production boosts and new buildings, must be given workers to function.**
LEFT **Coal production is critical: run out and the generator fails, and then everyone freezes to death**



FE

A pint-size polyglot is the star of Zoink Games' magical new adventure

Developer	Zoink Games
Publisher	Electronic Arts
Format	PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
Origin	Sweden
Release	2018

What a mysterious departure from the norm for Zoink Games. The Swedish studio's previous output has been limited to irreverent 2D games such as *Stick It To The Man* and *Zombie Vikings*. But *Fe* is something else entirely. Fittingly, its titular creature is a spiky outsider in a strange polygonal forest full of animals, where exploration is inextricably linked with communication. Skittering fauna, phosphorescent plants and an ethereal score immediately captivate: a deer calf freezes out of what might be fear, or curiosity. Fe carefully approaches. Then, it opens its mouth.

What follows is a gorgeous little gurgle that tails off into a kind of low-pitched growl, a noise designed to soothe. Produced by lightly feathering the trigger, the sound radiates from Fe in milky waves and is immediately endearing. The deer seems to like the babyish cooing, too, breaking into operatic reply. "There is definitely the idea of a child in Fe," says **Hugo Bille**, creative director, as the two animals share a conspiratory crackle of lightning to signal their bond. "That helplessness is a big part of its character. It's capable, but small and ultimately vulnerable." Indeed, the adventure is inspired by the devs' unsupervised childhood jaunts through Nordic forests: giddy experiences coloured with fear and wonder.

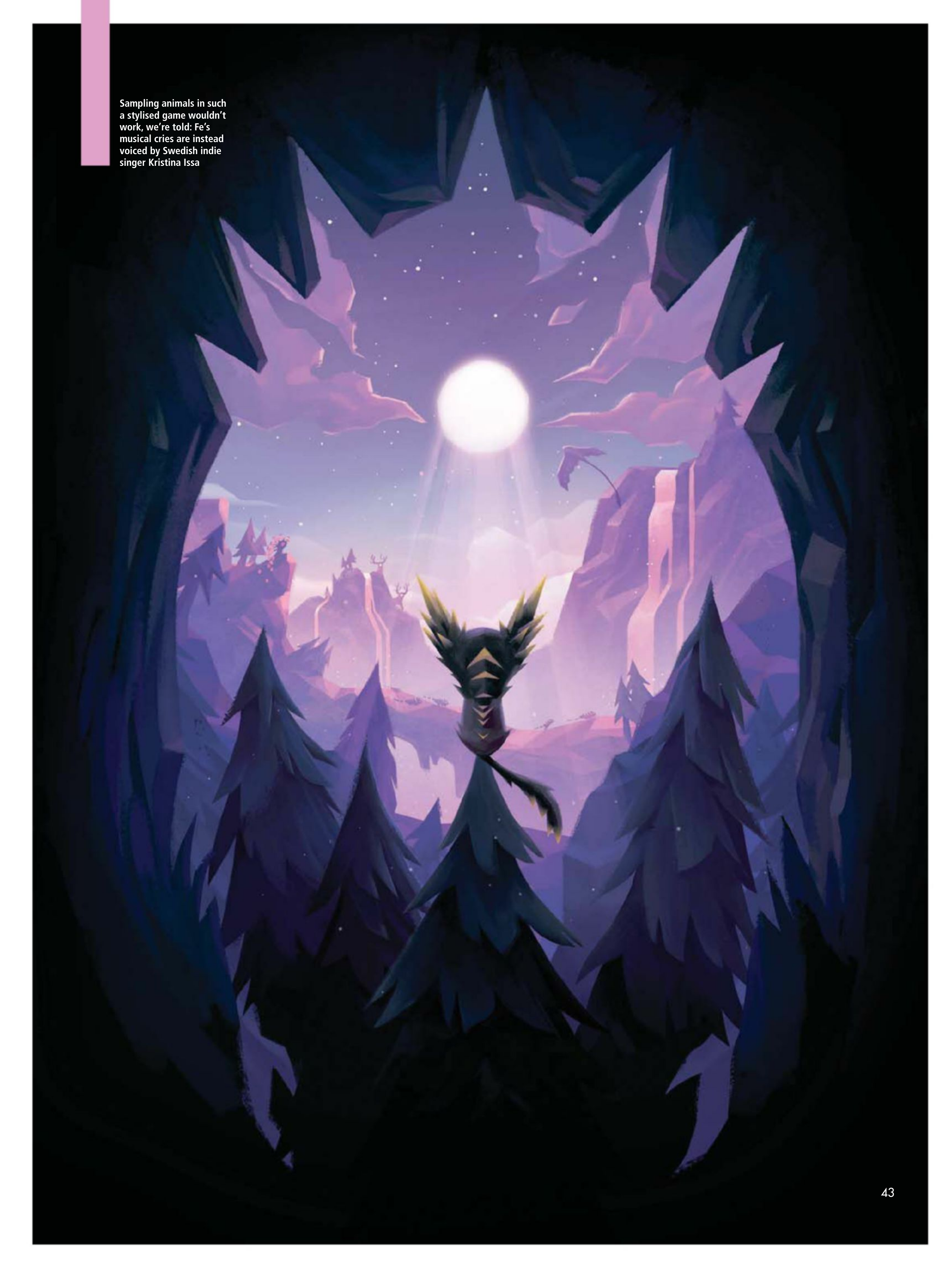
Like any infant trying to understand the world, Fe's greatest tool is asking incessant questions. By controlling its voice to an agreeable pitch and volume, and making non-threatening movements, Fe can build relationships with forest life. Each semi-fantastical being will respond differently to its advances, so the player must pay attention to audiovisual cues and adjust approaches accordingly. "The core idea from the very beginning was that we wanted to create a language that was ambiguous," Bille says. "You can't be sure what effect your input is having. If an animal runs away, was it because I went too close? Did I do something with my voice? That's what it would be like to talk to an actual animal out there: you don't have a shared language." It's all about trying to get on something else's wavelength – a philosophy further illustrated by sound design. "Joel [Bille], who does all the sound effects and music, even makes sure Fe's animal sounds are in key with the music," says **Klaus Lyngeled**, CEO and creative director.

And once you've convinced a new pal to follow you through the forest, their species' special ability will invariably come in handy, even if you don't know how yet. An awareness of what's around you and how it all might fit together is key: this is a game that rewards a certain healthy curiosity. "Our core tenet is ▶



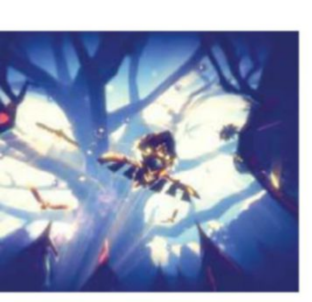


From top to bottom: Andreas Beijer, Klaus Lyngeled and Hugo Bille, creative directors



Sampling animals in such a stylised game wouldn't work, we're told: Fe's musical cries are instead voiced by Swedish indie singer Kristina Issa





Fe's all-singing, all-gliding action is reminscent of Thatgamecompany's *Journey*

always going to be exploration," Bille says. "That's a big and nebulous concept, but we can break it down to two things: exploring the environment, and exploring the ecosystem." While previously, an odd orange flower might have ignored our crooning, coming across another with a deer in tow reveals all – it can yodel a tune that causes these draft flowers to bloom and help boost Fe upwards to new areas. The twittering of birds, meanwhile, opens a certain kind of pollen pod, whose glowing spores interfere with the technology of enemy traps.

Yes, enemies. The idyll is threatened by an ominous army of Silent Ones: shadowy, cycloptic beings that capture wildlife for testing, from which Fe must help protect the forest. Their ominous presence requires stealthier play: moving slowly through tall grass, hiding in treetops, keeping Fe's voice low. Sometimes, their traps can even be used to your advantage, as we discover when luring a bear away from a stolen egg with a tempting berry. But a later section of our demo, worryingly, sees Fe snatched up often by Silent Ones: the open nature of the forest, however, means such stealth is unlikely to be overly enforced. If spotted, you can escape, provided you're able to scramble up a tall pine in time. And what a scramble it is: barely animated at all, as Fe's shape flickers from spot to spot in singular frames. "I wanted something quick and fluid," Lyngeled says. "It has to feel like you're a real squirrel. They don't think even think about it. They just *go*. And after a while, you don't think about the animation either. It just becomes natural."

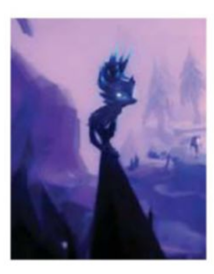
"I wanted something quick and fluid. It has to feel like you're a real squirrel"

Climbing trees is just one potential locomotive power – so is a winged glide letting Fe swoop, mid-fall, into effortless flight – that organically opens up more of the forest. "When you make an action-adventure platformer like this, it's your responsibility to spend a lot of time on the core movement," says Bille. "You need to want to go back to places and traverse them in new ways, so traversal needs to be fun in itself." And in the absence of visible maps or objectives, a good vantage point is functional. "We want a world big enough that you can get lost in it a little bit, but small enough that you get comfortable with it over time," Bille says. The spell of this adherence to a less didactic form of design is briefly broken by a rare UI insistence that we collect three crystals to buy an ability. "That does look a little bit game-y," Bille admits. "We're trying to strike that difficult balance between making something understandable and making it feel natural." Lyngeled points out that such abilities aren't strictly necessary to progress. "For me, the real upgrade system, if you want to call it that, is learning new songs."

Communication is the true heart of the game, and enough of it grants Fe free use of different animal languages. An encounter with a gigantic, trapped deer adds its lexicon to your radial vocabulary menu. Gone is the need to constantly lead critters to obstacles: Fe can simply pipe up in the dialect of your choice. And as the echoes of its burbling song tune into various life forms and light up the forest, something stirs in heart and eyes alike.

Emotion seems caught up in every corner. "Especially in regards to the animal interactions, and the believability of it, and forgoing human speech," Bille nods. "Something we talk a lot about with *Fe* is – there's a great word in Swedish, 'ursprünglich', I can't quite translate it – but the original state that is at the core of us. Approaching another creature and, stripped of all the culture and civilisation that surrounds us, meeting somehow. That might be where the emotion is coming from: we're scaling off so much of our humanity."

Lyngeled, meanwhile, traces *Fe*'s affecting energy to more personal sources. "I think there's definitely something of Andreas [Beijer, co-creative director] in there, the way he's thinking and feeling. And I think we put a lot of energy into it, because it's something new for us, too. It's an exploration for us as we make it." Indeed, there's an irresistible parallel to be drawn: both Zoink Games and its curious little creature are charting unfamiliar territory by learning to speak a different language. ■



Character sprite

It's crucial that the design of Fe (meaning 'fairy' in Swedish) inspires empathy. "It has to look cute, but it has to also look badass sometimes," says Klaus Lyngeled. "I thought it was important you really feel for it. I did the original character design, and then Stina [Rahm], who is an amazing artist, took it further. Actually, the original character design was just a tree. But we wanted to evoke an emotion that you are somebody." Fe's charming cry is made up of anywhere between 8 to 12 sounds, merged, pitched and cross-faded together. "If we want to try something different, we have to reassemble all of it. It's complicated, but worth it. Joel [Bille, sound designer] did actually sample some babies at some point – but we cut those. It was too scary, almost."

TOP **You can leverage your forest friends against Silent Ones: bears will do anything for their favourite food.**
ABOVE **The sandbox world is fairly small, but learning to fly, climb and burrow into the ground will reveal new depths and passageways.**
LEFT **The story is deliberately left ambiguous, with pieces scattered around for the player to fit together – "almost like a David Lynch movie," Lyngeled says.**
BOTTOM **Most encounters in the forest are intimate, but some are epic, *Shadow Of The Colossus*-style sections with climbable god-creatures**





GWENT: THE WITCHER CARD GAME

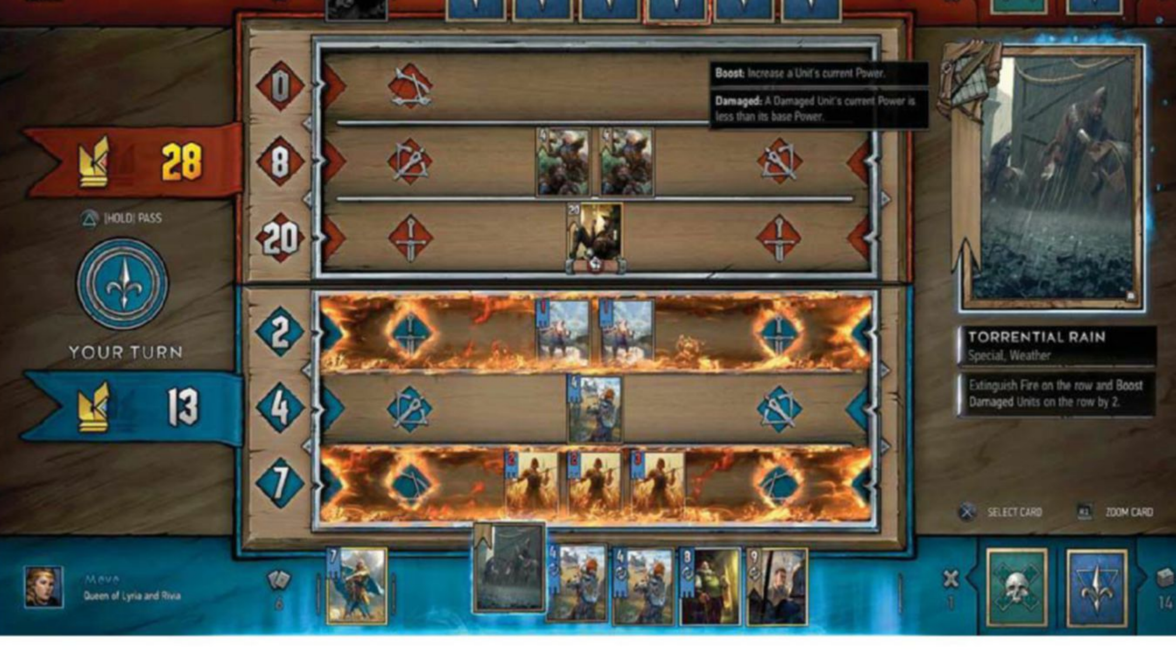
How CD Projekt's standalone story mode will crack the card-game genre wide open

Developer	CD Projekt Red
Publisher	CD Projekt
Format	PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin	Poland
Release	2017

A line in *The Witcher 2* suggests Thronebreaker's main character, Queen Meve, is not Geralt's biggest fan. The developers are coy, but seem to suggest the White Wolf might make a cameo







ABOVE **Thronebreaker's overworld might be simple, but it's beautiful, hand-drawn and subtly animated.**
TOP RIGHT **Dialogue choices often throw up moral conundrums: choosing to pardon these peasants may negatively impact Meve's reputation in the long run.**
MAIN **The UI remains similar for card battles. Regular *Gwent* players will note the new fire ability here, which works like a regular weather effect but is unique to the singleplayer campaign.**
BELOW LEFT **Thronebreaker cards have abilities tailored to storytelling. You'll get 20 new ones for your multiplayer deck, too – though they are merely 'inspired' by the campaign cards, to preserve balance.**
BELOW RIGHT **Hawkesburn is peppered with lootable chests – and even side-quests, which can grant extra resources and build relationships with recruits**







GWENT: THE WITCHER CARD GAME



Jakub Szamalek, principal writer

Despite its apparent status as a diversion in *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* – just another thing to do in a game, and a world, that was full of them – for many, Gwent became the main event. Players sunk hours into the one-on-one card duels, prompting CD Projekt Red to greenlight this fully fledged standalone game. *Gwent* has been playable for months in beta form, its core strategy and combo-building momentum – the goal, to win two out of three rounds by accumulating the most points with the cards you play – now beautifully presented and infused with new mechanical dynamism.

So far, so shiny new addition to a venerable genre. But CD Projekt Red's sights are set higher. Set some time before the events of *The Witcher III*, forthcoming singleplayer campaign Thronebreaker casts you as Meve, Queen of Lyria and Rivia, and tells of her fight for the Northern Realms in the face of an invasion, using a mix of thirdperson exploration, branching dialogue and specially crafted mechanics in its narrative card battles.

"We knew that if we ever decided to do a singleplayer mode, it would be an ambitious project," principal writer **Jakub Szamalek** tells us. Previously senior writer on *The Witcher III*, he has fond memories of playing collectible card games such as Magic: The Gathering and Battlelords. "They showed you can combine map exploration with a card game and it's not such a huge juxtaposition. We realised that we needed more space than just the playing board."

Indeed, *Gwent*'s Thronebreaker campaign has inherited some RPG tendencies from its progenitor. The five maps across which the 15-hour story is sprawled are filled with loot: resources like weapons or crafting materials that will augment Queen Meve's 'army', the fighting units in your deck. They are found in chests around the map, often protected by light environmental puzzles that need solving, and sometimes containing valuable 'premium' cards (animated versions of standard fare). At any point on your journey, you're able to pitch camp to upgrade facilities, such as the training yard or workshop, to improve battle abilities.

That might not be quite what you'd normally expect from a collectible card game, but that's the point: with Thronebreaker, CD Projekt Red is trying a new approach to the genre. This extends to battles, which reject easy cliché. "What we took away from other card games was that we didn't want to make a story about a *Gwent* champion," Szamalek says. "We felt it was best to use *Gwent*'s mechanics to represent real-life battles, and use the cards as a way of symbolically telling a story." Meve, for example, can be summoned frequently and repeatedly, and buffs nearby allies.



Exactly who fights alongside you depends on the dialogue options you choose in encounters throughout Meve's journey. "As in the *Witcher* series, there are still choices, and consequences that make you think and re-think those choices. But we want you to feel the responsibility that a commander feels," Szamalek says. "Geralt had the comfort of working on his own, whereas Meve is leading an army." Choose to be charitable if soldiers desert you, and you may risk undermining your authority; punish them harshly, and the effect on morale could be crippling. The presence or absence of certain advisors or officers also affects the kinds of unit you're able to build and take advantage of, as well as forcing your hand in certain quests where you might have been able to avoid a brawl.

> ***"As long as there's no one looking over your shoulder, you're safe to make mistakes"***

Thronebreaker is set to be a particular treat for seasoned *Gwent* players, Szamalek says: "We don't have to be so careful about balance, so we can create cards that are overpowered, or craft scripted battles which contain challenging logic puzzles – things that we can't do in a multiplayer game." But it's also about offering a less intimidating experience for newcomers when the expansion launches. "I think people who avoid multiplayer games worry about looking silly in front of others," Szamalek says. "As long as there's no one looking over your shoulder, you're safe to make some mistakes here. Lots of people prefer singleplayer games, and aren't happy to play multiplayer. The opposite is also true. But sometimes it's worth crossing the boundary and seeing what's on the other side. A game like *Gwent*, which has both components, can be a place to do that." ■



House of cards

The process of creating a new *Gwent* card is a highly collaborative and iterative one, Szamalek tells us. "Mateusz [Tomaszkiewicz, principal narrative designer] and I work together with the gameplay guys, who know what kind of card they need in terms of what the deck they're working on is missing. We come up with suggestions of names and characters from the series lore that fit the bill, then write descriptions for the artists and animators." But the cards are new territory for Szamalek: "The challenge for me as a writer was telling a story using different tools than the ones I'm used to. Working on the *Witcher* series, I could rely on cinematics. But in Thronebreaker, I can't. Instead, I can use the narrator to describe characters' thoughts, fears and hopes. That's something we didn't have in *The Witcher III*."



Developer/publisher Team Meat
Format Android, iOS, PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
Origin US
Release 2018





SUPER MEAT BOY FOREVER

The platformer's sequel shows Team Meat has changed its tune

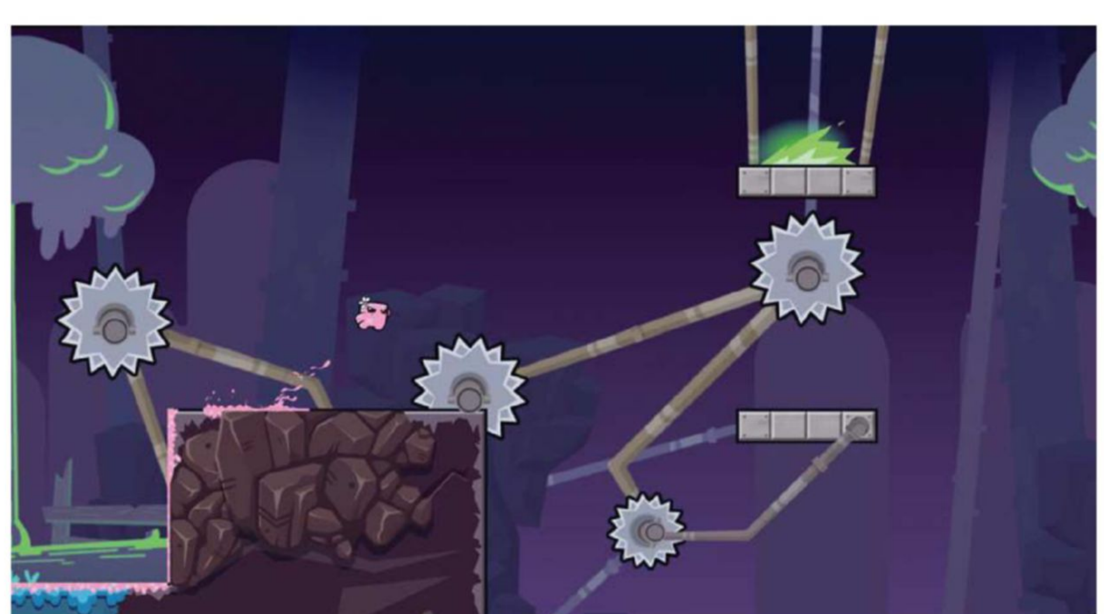
Boy, does it feel good to have the skinless wonder back under the thumbs. He patters and smacks through levels, up walls and over band saws with the same satisfying heft as ever. Little wonder: original *Super Meat Boy* programmer **Tommy Refenes** is creating this sequel, preserving everything that makes *Meat Boy*, well, *Meat Boy*. Weighty physics, tight controls, instant respawns, gory splatter trails – it's all still here. Quite the feat, considering so much has changed.

Super Meat Boy co-creator Edmund McMillen is no longer involved. This started life as an iPhone title. It only uses two buttons. And, technically, it's a runner. Not an *endless* runner – often associated with mechanical compromise and microtransactions – but a game that automatically moves its hero from left to right. Many instantly turned up their noses at this mobile-friendly, seemingly much diminished *Meat Boy*. "We're still getting over the stigma, because we named it *Forever*," admits Refenes, laughing. "It's called *Forever* for a different reason."

Namely, the dynamically constructed levels. Each is made up of around 40 to 50 potential level chunks. Exiting to the menu and reloading the stage triggers a reshuffle, with obstacles, walls and enemies changing. Replaying a finished level, meanwhile, ramps up its difficulty. "We design all those mini-levels and give them what we call a cadence," Refenes says. "You don't want a linear increase in difficulty, you want to give the player some rests. So we assign all of the chunks we make a numerical value across four difficulty levels, and have these cadence strings for each." With fewer, but longer, levels, the regenerating format seemed a natural fit – and you can play, conceivably, forever.



Tommy Refenes



Dark Worlds return, offering a stricter challenge: unlike *Forever*'s regular levels, there are no checkpoints







Hold the phone

Our demo is on Switch, rather than a smartphone – but Refenes assures us that the two-button control scheme makes playing on a touchscreen precise enough to keep platforming obsessives happy. "They don't want a touchscreen D-pad and buttons. They just want a good *Meat Boy* game on their phone." One thing is certain, however: Refenes isn't taking his cues from *Super Mario Run*. "I played the first world, and it didn't grab me. I was actually worried when that came out, because I thought they'd beaten me to it. Then I played it and thought, 'I guess I still have another crack at this'. It looks like *Mario*, but it doesn't feel like *Mario*. I don't know why. I know better than anybody how *Meat Boy* feels, because I created it. And I set out to make a *Meat Boy* game – not a mobile *Meat Boy* game, just a *Meat Boy* game."

For those put off by *Super Meat Boy*'s difficulty, a more open approach may appeal. When we're stumped by a wall-climbing saw at the end of one level, reloading throws up a preferable option. We're not sure if it's a simpler chunk or just different, untainted by our previous failures and grisly splatterings.

This turn away from total sadism will undoubtedly divide opinion among the *Meat Boy* community. But the core platforming seems an even steeper ask, with the controls whittled down to savage points. The first of two buttons plummets Meat Boy down in a dive – without the ability to correct trajectory in mid-air, it's crucial to getting back to the ground quickly and precisely. The second button is jump, held to propel you further. Both buttons are also used to attack enemies: pressing jump twice in mid-air throws out a punch for an extra momentum boost. Diving while grounded performs a slide attack.

Mentally juggling their uses while making split-second calls on angles, obstacles and optimal routes is tough enough, but then there's muscle memory to deal with. While old strategies still work – hugging dissolving bricks to barrel through rather than jumping away and back again, for instance – we habitually tap left on the D-pad to correct a jump. But in *Forever*, Meat Boy just keeps going – often, to his death. Refenes is working against years of gaming instinct. "Your brain wants to buffer jumps, for instance. We do have to compensate for stuff like that, because that's unfair. But you have to learn that it's precise, because if you're like 'Oh, I've got ten frames to jump off this cliff', then…" He laughs. "Life is pointless!"

Indeed, learning, practising and tapping out perfect patterns is the frenzied vitality that throbs through the genre. With just two buttons, *Forever* feels strangely like a rhythm game, we observe – the world's most hellish rendition of Chopsticks. "Each little level is like a song, almost," Refenes nods. "I should put notes to the buttons and, instead of a replay, play back this terrible WAV file."

"We design all those mini-levels and give them what we call a cadence"

We're half-tempted to take him seriously: Refenes is clearly out to remix a familiar tune, to challenge both players' expectations and his own capabilities. "If I'm not challenging myself, then I'm bored," he says. "It would be the easiest thing in the world to throw a million levels together in the old editor, put an HD coat of paint on it, and cash in. I wanted to make something different that felt the same. So far, I think I've succeeded." ■

Meat Boy's belle, Bandage Girl, is now playable at any time. Her air attack is a swift kick instead of a punch





ROUND-UP

SKY

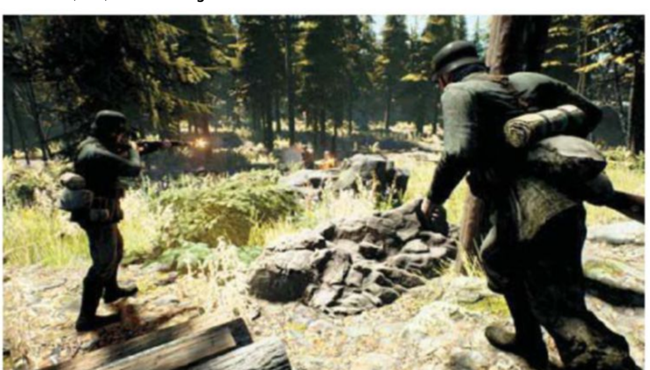
Developer/publisher Thatgamecompany **Format** iOS **Origin** US **Release** 2017



The *Journey* and *Flower* developer has been teasing something big, blue and cloudy via its Twitter for months. We now know that something is *Sky* (perhaps, in retrospect, we should have guessed that earlier). Thatgamecompany's first game to be built exclusively for mobile devices is a "social adventure game" set among a world of floating isles. Although the billowing red capes and the cloud-mountain in the distance scream *Journey*, the range of player interactions in this ever-evolving space is much broader: cooperation is key in groups of up to eight players, but there's also room for competition, if you choose. Exact details are scarce at the moment, but with a winter release fast approaching, the mystery and mist will soon clear.

BATTALION 1944

Developer Bulkhead Interactive **Publisher** Square Enix Collective **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** UK **Release** 2018



You have to feel sorry for tiny British studio Bulkhead Interactive: really, it got to the WWII-shooter frenzy first with old-school shooter *Battalion 1944*. Kickstarted in 2016 in under three days, the announcement of *Call Of Duty: WWII* means it's now the underdog. It's a scrappy one, focusing on skill-based gameplay over gimmicks. We'll have more next issue, but know this: *COD* may have won the PR battle, but it might not have clinched the war just yet.

LA NOIRE

Developer Team Bondi **Publisher** Rockstar Games **Format** PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Origin** US **Release** November 14



It's the Switch port that has us most excited about returning to *LA Noire*, the 2011 detective adventure centred around policing a lavishly recreated '40s-era City Of Angels. News of a VR case intrigues, too, even if the prospect of interrogating those wobbly-faced ne'er-do-wells up close is mildly horrific.

STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT II

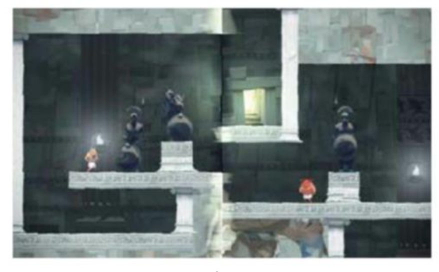
Developer Motive Studios, EA Dice, Criterion Software **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Format** PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Origin** Canada, Sweden, UK **Release** November 17



A recent demo shows *Battlefront II*'s dogfighting remains simple – perhaps to a fault. Criterion designer John Stanley says maps will now have a greater narrative focus, but aside from the new singleplayer campaign, we're starting to wonder whether this is really the sequel we're looking for.

DYO

Developer/publisher Team Dyo **Format** PC **Origin** Germany **Release** 2018



This elegant co-op puzzle platformer drew us in at one recent show. You play one of two minotaurs trapped in a labyrinth: reach each level's exits by merging your split screens and creating new paths. You'll often need a boost from your buddy to reach certain areas, however, which requires care.

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VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY




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Meet the band of superstar developers keeping Nintendo on top of the world

By Nathan Brown

Kenta Motokura

Director, Super Mario Odyssey

Joined Nintendo
2000

Selected softography
Pikmin (GameCube), *Donkey Kong Jungle Beat* (GameCube), *Super Mario Galaxy* (Wii), *Super Mario 3D World* (Wii U)

Favourite Nintendo game
I'm very attached to *Pikmin* and *Super Mario Sunshine*. The fun of the sandbox gameplay; the relationship between art and design; the difficulty of making something new; my feelings towards the work which was always fun whatever I did; and the models I made – which, looking back on them now, don't look so good. I always return to these titles whenever I feel like I'm on the verge of forgetting something.

You began your Nintendo career as an artist. How closely did you work with the design teams, and what did you learn from them about making *Mario* games?
At first I was responsible for character modelling and animation, but I gradually became more involved with the technical design of the characters I was making too. In *Super Mario Galaxy*, I was involved with the design for the player character and in *Super Mario Galaxy 2* I was involved with some level design. I don't think the work of artists can be separated from the design side. I really learned a lot of things from working on *Mario* games, including the elements of gameplay, what makes an action game fun, and how to face problems simply.

You've been at Nintendo since the GameCube era. How have development processes changed over the years?
The gameplay mechanics are different, so it's not really possible to do a straight comparison. In the development of *Super Mario Odyssey* there were a lot more things we could do compared to what we could during the days of Wii. We have a greater range of expression, we can place more objects, and there's more freedom in how the controllers can be used. We still needed to make use of this freedom when making the game though, and rather than do things differently we were actually making sure to experiment lots through trial, error and quick response, just like we did in the old days.

We often think of long-running series of being a little stuck in their ways, but a new 3D *Mario* game always feels different. What are the rules you absolutely cannot break when making one?
It's actually *because* it's a long-running series that I think it's important to provide consumers with new gameplay experiences. Both adults and children have the same feeling of excitement about new things, and while it might sometimes be risky, I think the 3D *Mario* series is evolving along with its audience. This is the rule that we absolutely can't break – that we have to be serious in trying to create new experiences when making the games.

***Odyssey* returns to the world-based, sandbox style of *Super Mario 64* and *Sunshine*. How different an approach does that require when it comes to level design? To put it another way – what makes a good world in a 3D *Mario* game?**
Compared to other releases in the series, sandbox-type games offer more control over the camera, so it's harder to keep track of where you are in the world. We need to place landmarks and routes so you don't get lost, but also let you go exploring for yourself. We adjust the amount of gameplay in a place, considering what players are looking for when they go there. A good world in a 3D *Mario* game is one that is well thought out. Ideally, we want it to make sense to players when they find out the reason why some piece of gameplay is where it is, or why the art is how it is, or why the world is the size that it is.

***Odyssey*'s capture system came from an experimental prototype. Tell us about how that phase works – once you've built something and have decided you personally like it, what happens next?**
I actually try ideas out and see how they are at every stage. After thinking an idea through in my head, and on paper, I play with it to check whether it's really good or not. When we actually make something, some things turn out to be not so fun, so they don't make it into the game. With fun ideas, the next step is to think about what kind of gameplay rules would work with them, what kind of level design would suit them, and then we build something so we can actually try it out again.

What's been the biggest challenge you've faced making *Super Mario Odyssey*, and how did you conquer it?
The biggest challenges were the game mechanics for the capture ability and the designs of the new sandbox levels. For the capture ability, you could think of each capture as a new transformation, so it took a long time to implement and fine-tune. Because you can use enemies and objects, we had to discard part of our existing approach to level design that we'd built up over previous Mario games and come up with designs that work for this game.

Also, we made it so that players could choose which of the many Power Moons in the sandbox stages to get or skip over as they play through the game. In *Super Mario 64* and *Super Mario Sunshine*, when you collect a Star or Shine Sprite you are taken back to the hub area. But in *Super Mario Odyssey* the game isn't suddenly stopped like that – we tried to make it

so you can keep exploring by yourself, and immerse yourself in Mario's world.

Looking back on *Odyssey*'s development, is there one aspect of which you're particularly proud?
The theme for this game is the sense of surprise a journey brings, and I feel like in making this game, Mario has taught me all about the limitless potential that both he and games in general have. I made each individual part of this game while keeping in mind what Mario would have to say about it. I hope you'll go and play in all kinds of different places in the levels!

Many developers around the world would give anything to work on a *Mario* game. Is it as creatively fulfilling as it seems from the outside? Do you want to try other things, or would you happily make *Mario* games forever?
As I mentioned in my answer above, I think there is still much more potential for games. Of course, I love Mario, so part of me does want to make *Mario* games, but he might not always be the best choice depending on how we want to output this potential. When I come up with a gameplay idea, I'd like to be able to deliver it in the way best suited to it.



"It's actually *because* it's a long-running series that I think it's important to provide consumers with new gameplay experiences"

Which member of senior Nintendo staff have you worked most closely with, and what is the most valuable thing you learned from them?
I've learned game design from Mr [Shigeru] Miyamoto, Mr [Yoshiaki] Koizumi, Mr [Koichi] Hayashida and the other directors of past 3D *Mario* games. They've had an immeasurable impact on me in how I go about making *Odyssey*, teaching me things like what a *Mario* game should be, what it means to challenge oneself to do something, and what level design is all about. I'm just a single artist, and I was lucky enough to have the chance to have lots of conversations over a long period. I feel incredibly fortunate. ▶

Kosuke Yabuki

Producer, Mario Kart 8, Arms

Joined Nintendo
2005

Selected softography
The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess (GameCube, Wii), *Mario Kart Wii* (Wii), *Mario Kart 7* (3DS)

Favourite Nintendo game
It's very hard to choose a favourite. Mr [Hideki] Konno says *Mario Kart* is a "communication tool" and this idea has been very important for me. This idea is something not just in *Mario Kart*, but in many of Nintendo's games. In addition to the games you play with others like *Arms*, *Splatoon* and *Animal Crossing*, even for games you play alone, like *Super Mario Bros* or *The Legend Of Zelda*, it's really fun talking to people about how far you got, or how you beat some part. I think the Nintendo developers, including Mr Miyamoto and Mr [Takashi] Tezuka, have been conscious of this point while making games, and I want to continue that tradition.

Mario Kart has been around for years – many Edge readers have played every entry, over almost a quarter of a century. But what's the one thing people who only play _Mario Kart_ don't know about the game – something that you'll only realise if you've worked on it yourself?
We remake the game from scratch with each iteration – the program, the graphics and the audio, you name it! Even if we're creating similar features, since we're starting from scratch and putting it all together again, they change a little bit each time. I think this steady build-up of small changes is very important for the *Mario Kart* series.

Mario Kart 8 Deluxe is the only exception. We used *Mario Kart 8* as our base to work from and focused on creating varied battle rules and things that make use of Nintendo Switch's key features. We also added support for players using one Joy-Con controller each and for local wireless. I think we've made it into a perfect game for Nintendo Switch.

Similarly, what's the hardest thing about making a _Mario Kart_ game? Is there a certain item or game system that is particularly difficult to implement?
I suppose that's the item system that lets people play together even if there's some gap in their skill. A moment's luck can help you win, or make you lose. And if you do lose? Well, in developing the game we aimed to balance it so that even when you lose, you still want to try once more.

How does it feel to be asked to take a leadership role on such a famous – and important – series as _Mario Kart_? Do you feel more personal pressure now than you did before, and if so, how do you deal with it?
There's always both fun and pressure when developing a new game. That's regardless of what my role is, or whether it's a famous series or not. Each day we work to develop the game as a team, and with our passion, we work to make a unique and fun game, with a vision of the fun the people who play it will have.

Mr Miyamoto challenges Nintendo's teams to make something new. How do you make something that feels new when you're bound by the conventions of such a long-running series as _Mario Kart_?
Mr Miyamoto often asks me how what I'm working on is different from other games, or from the previous game in the series. I'm always thinking about this so that I'd be able to answer that question. If I don't keep thinking about it, then I can't find the answer.

If we simply kept the key features of the *Mario Kart* series and just polished them more with each title, then we would struggle to release products that appeal to people. If we don't include new experiences and surprises beyond what the people who play it are expecting, then I don't think they'd consider it an appealing product. Rather than aiming to meet consumer expectations, I'm aiming to exceed them.

How did _Arms_ – not the game itself, but the idea to do something new – come about? Was it your idea to do something different, or did the decision come from above?
Nintendo is always prototyping new game ideas. The origin of *Arms* was one such prototype. The prototype started with the ideas "Can we make a thirdperson-perspective fighting game?" and "What if we made it a game where you fight with extending arms?" And from that we created a game with never-before-seen strategies and techniques.

I also thought that the idea was a good fit for the Joy-Con and Nintendo Switch, so I decided to form a team and start making *Arms* for real. I was also making *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* at the time, so I needed lots of people to help support me. I'm really grateful to them.

Your performance at the Arms E3 Invitational was quite something. Are you a demon at _Mario Kart_, too? Do you have to be good at games to be able to make good games?
Arms hadn't been released when E3 was held, so I may have had a bit of an advantage because I'd had the chance to play it a lot during development! Once *Arms* was released, people improved so fast and now there are lots of people around the world I wouldn't have a chance against! I'm very happy about that.

For both *Arms* and *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe*, my skills are about somewhere in the middle of the range of the development team. Our team not only has skilled gamers, but also people who are not so good at games, and I was playtesting with them every day while developing the

game. In order to make a game that lots of people can enjoy regardless of their level of skill, it's important that there are all types of people in the development team. You don't necessarily need to be good at playing games.

While it's still early days, how satisfied are you with your work on *Arms*, and the public response to it? What ideas do you have for how it could be improved, or expanded, in the future?
Arms is a completely new fighting game. There are lots of strategies and techniques that are completely new in this game. I'm very glad that there are people who are enjoying it and how new this experience feels.

We will keep adjusting the game's balance so as many people as possible can keep enjoying it for a long time. We also recently added control customisation, plan to include training options, and of course we are working on new fighters and stages too. I hope that *Arms* will continue to grow along with the players.



"Once Arms was released, people improved so fast and now there are lots of people around the world I wouldn't have a chance against"

The two games for which you are known best are playful riffs on established genres. *Mario Kart* is a very different kind of racing game; *Arms* is a fighting game, but it also kind of isn't. Were you fans of those two kinds of game before they made them? Are there any other genres of which you're a particular fan?
When I was a child I played *Super Mario Kart* and *Street Fighter 2* a lot with my brothers and friends, but I never thought I would actually be making anything like *Mario Kart 8* or *Arms* myself! You never know what's going to happen in life.

I'm a gamer, so I play lots of different genres. I also love actual toys and sports. All of the Nintendo developers, and not just me, are always trying to create unique gameplay experiences. If I think I can create some unique experience like *Mario Kart* or *Arms*, then I want to try, regardless of the genre. ▶

Hisashi Nogami

Producer, Splatoon 2

Joined Nintendo
1994

Selected softography
Yoshi's Island (SNES), *Yoshi's Story* (N64), *Animal Crossing* (GameCube), Mii Channel (Wii)

Favourite Nintendo game
I definitely have a lot, but if I was to give my favourite I'd say it has to be *The Legend Of Zelda*. I must have completed it over 30 times by now if you count both the normal game and Second Quest. I like how what you choose to do is up to you. Sometimes I ended up making a wrong choice and getting myself a bit lost, but it gave me a sense of forging my own path. I felt the same was true of the latest entry to the series, *Breath Of The Wild*. It's a lot of fun.

How did you break into game development?
I originally joined Nintendo as a graphic designer for games. At the time, there wasn't a department just for debug, and so debugging was done within the department, with new entries to the company being pulled straight in to help. For the first half year after joining I had no graphic design work to do and instead I just worked on debug!

***Splatoon* was the first game to emerge from Nintendo's Garage initiative. Can you tell us more about the setup of Garage?**
Garage isn't so much the name of an initiative of a few staff members as it is a team name. The staff on the Garage team were developers who worked on Wii U launch titles like *Nintendo Land* and *New Super Mario Bros U*. It happened that several teams were disbanded at the same time and around 10 people from these teams were appointed to form a team to propose new games.

We held discussions among ourselves while planning and prototyping many different ideas. After several presentations, the idea we decided to officially develop with a view to turning into a product became the basis for *Splatoon*.

The Garage members at the time were almost all brought into the development team for *Splatoon* once it became an official project, so the Garage team itself was disbanded. However, even if there isn't a 'Garage' anymore, at Nintendo we're constantly searching for new game ideas, and sometimes these ideas produce new products. One example of this would be *Animal Crossing*, which Mr Eguchi and I developed over 15 years ago, while another game that came out of this same process is *Arms*.

You've been with Nintendo for over 20 years, which makes you best equipped to answer the biggest question. What's Shigeru Miyamoto *really* like to work with?
While Mr Miyamoto is affable and cheery, he's very strict when it comes to the job of creating games. If the idea you're presenting isn't thought out well enough, he's quick to pick up on it and point out anything that's lacking. Before presenting any idea to him, I would go over it again and again to ensure there wasn't anything I had missed; no contradictions or oversights or the like. I feel he's teaching us how important deep reflection is for game developers.

While it's not exactly a 'true' shooter, prior to *Splatoon*, Nintendo didn't have much experience with the genre. How hard was it to turn the concept into a reality? And what were the most valuable lessons you learned about how that style of game should be made?
We didn't aim to create a shooter title. We simply ended up with the current style after we combined Nintendo-style action with the concept of a competitive area-control game.

Nintendo has created other competitive games before and the *Splatoon* staff also usually play a variety of different competitive games too, so we do understand their appeal.

What we were aiming for was to create a competitive game that would be easy for novices to get into, while at the same time also providing enough of a challenge even if you play it over and over again. To achieve this, we felt that, firstly, we had to make sure we played the game a lot ourselves; and secondly, we also needed to follow up on how users were playing after release and add in changes. I feel this approach has produced some positive results.

***Splatoon* was the first Nintendo game to be supported by a steady flow of free, post-release updates. How much of a cultural shift was that for a company like Nintendo, for whom even packaged DLC has been a rarity?**
While *Splatoon* is a game with some elements like those in shooters, it also has a new kind of game logic where you win or turn the flow of a match to your advantage by inking over the ground and walls. That was really new. So, we were concerned that we might confuse players if we suddenly offered them lots of weapons and stage variations, and instead we decided to add content bit by bit as players became more seasoned.

By adding new weapons and stages we change the whole battle dynamic, too, and our intention with this was to keep players engaged and coming back. This wasn't a big decision for Nintendo, and I don't think it's the first example of us doing this either. It's simply that it was what we needed to do for *Splatoon*, and so that's why we went for it.

It's very much a family game. While its appeal to a younger generation is obvious, *Splatoon* is also enjoyed by plenty of veteran shooter players. Why do you think that is?

We don't develop games to target only a specific user group. We're making games that can be enjoyed by as many people as possible. We're gamers too and usually play a variety of games. We aimed to build a competitive game that we'd enjoy, so perhaps it's this that those users appreciate.

It's been especially popular in Japan. Why is that, do you think?
There have been a lot of *Splatoon* teams that formed in Japan's user community. I feel this is one reason why *Splatoon* has been enjoyed for so long by so many people; these teams have battled against each other, competed to see who is best and have deepened the communication and interactions between users in doing so.

For users to more easily and more broadly achieve this, *Splatoon 2* includes new elements to enjoy the game as a team, such as league matches and team participation in Splatfests.

There are a lot of teams in Europe and America too and it would make me very happy to see even more interaction between teams and further activity in the community.



"I was sure we'd made something interesting, but I had no idea that we'd be supported by as many players as we are"

How surprised have you been at *Splatoon*'s success? More to the point, how surprised have your bosses been?
When we completed the game, I was sure we'd made something interesting, but I had no idea that we'd be supported by as many players as we are! Being surrounded by players from all over the world at the 2017 Splatoon 2 World Inkling Invitational held at this year's E3 was a precious and moving experience for me.

What's the most important thing you've learned during your time at Nintendo?
The most valuable things I've learned are to try and see things from the perspective of someone playing the game, and the importance of continuing to think things over until I've come up with an answer I'm satisfied with. ▶

Hidemaro Fujibayashi

Director, The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild

Joined Nintendo
2005

Selected softography
Magical Tetris Challenge (Game Boy), *The Legend Of Zelda: Minish Cap* (Game Boy Advance), *The Legend Of Zelda: Skyward Sword* (Wii)

Favourite Nintendo game
I think it has to be the very first *Zelda* game, specifically because it was built as an open-air concept, which was the basic idea for *Breath Of The Wild*. For me, it's an example of a game where the player is free to choose where they go and what they do. One further point is that the original *Zelda* was released on the Famicom Disk System, which was only sold in Japan. As a child at the time it seemed like such a new form of gameplay and really left an impression on me.

You've worked at Capcom, as well as Nintendo – even if you were working on Nintendo IP while at Capcom, you're not quite a 'lifer'. What makes Nintendo different from other game companies?
As far as I'm concerned, it's that all staff – whether they're programmers, artists, sound designers or whoever – go beyond the simple boundaries of their area of responsibility and suggest concrete ideas to each other to make a game more interesting. It's like everyone is a game planner! This was my first surprise when I moved to Nintendo.

Which member of senior Nintendo staff have you worked most closely with, and what is the most valuable thing you learned from them?
I've worked with many staff more senior than me, and what I can say about all of them is that their attitude towards development is to keep striving to make a game interesting right until the very end. Of course, there are limits on the length of development, but even at a stage when normally it would be very challenging to make a change to the game's design, they'd give a compelling reason and show with passion why the change is needed, and how it would improve the game. Their logic and enthusiasm passes on to the staff handling the change who then set about making the improvement. I've seen it countless times now where a game has dramatically improved like this, and it's been a valuable lesson for me.

***Breath Of The Wild* was a challenging project – a vast, seamless world built across two generations of console hardware. What was the biggest challenge you faced during development, and how did you surmount it?**
Of the games in the *Zelda* franchise, *BOTW* was one such title where the development included a lot of first attempts at things. Because of that, there were a lot of difficulties we faced, such as having to come up with new mechanics, ideas, and even a new flow for the game itself.

When I think about what the biggest issue was, it was probably sharing information with the roughly 300 staff involved on the project. With there being so many challenges we were facing for the first time, we needed everyone to be working with the same understanding of the exact specifications for the game, and the point of the gameplay we were aiming for. During development, I talked a lot with the staff and made a point of having very close communication with them.

Similarly, which element – whether a system, a mechanic, a location or quest – of the game are you particularly, personally proud?
I'd have to say it's the climbing mechanic where players can climb wherever they like. Once we gave the protagonist, Link, this ability, we were able to create the core gameplay cycle for *BOTW*: discover something, go take a look, discover something, go take a look.

***Breath Of The Wild* was, to put it mildly, very well received. Did you have the sense when you were making it that it was going to be something very special? How, in that respect, did making *Breath Of The Wild* feel different from previous games you've made?**
It was one title where there were certainly a lot of new challenges, but during development we could gradually start to feel people's positive reactions to it. Midway through development, we had the chance to get several pairs of people who don't usually play games to do a monitor test for us. In all the pairs, we found that both the person playing and the person watching next to them were enjoying talking with each other as they made their way through the game. I've seen similar reactions during development of *Zelda* titles I've been involved in before now, but the response to this monitor test went well beyond any of them. I remember this was really encouraging as we developed the game.

How close an eye have you been keeping on the crazy things people are getting up to in *Breath Of The Wild*? Have you seen many things you never thought possible, or that no one would be crazy enough to try?
The different ways that people are playing is a talking point among the staff here.

One way I personally found interesting is a method for defeating a Hinox with a Cucco. It would be a bit of a spoiler to go into details though so I won't say more here!

We designed the game to have multiple ways to solve puzzles and defeat enemies, and I'm really happy that people are coming up with these sorts of unique challenges or ideas.

***Breath Of The Wild* is radically different from other *Zelda* games, particularly some of the more recent entries. How much resistance, if any, was there**

against the approach you took in challenging some of the series' long-held traditions?
When we start development on a new title for the *Zelda* series, we always set out to take on a new challenge no matter what the title is. So even with *BOTW* there was very little push-back. If anything, there were a lot of opinions from the staff on which direction we should take to make the game most fun, with regard to the new gameplay and mechanics that had been proposed. I remember my days being swamped working to select the best ideas from among the many opinions.

Now the open-air structure has proven so successful for the series, can *Zelda* ever head back indoors? Or do you have ideas for how the linear, dungeon-focused structure could be similarly reinvented?
With *BOTW* we presented an idea for new gameplay that you see now, but there are a lot of systems and ideas that we came up with during development that we couldn't implement in *BOTW*. So, I don't doubt that we will be considering all sorts of game styles in the future too.

Creators are never fully satisfied with their finished works. Looking back on the game now, what do you wish you could have done differently?
In my case, there's been nothing I've regretted about how any of the titles I've worked on have gone. The same is true of *BOTW*. Together with the rest of the staff, we pour our best in that moment into our games, and so I honestly do not have anything that I'd like to change.

However, there have been a lot of times after we've just finished the mastering of a game where I've thought up even more interesting gameplay we could achieve with the mechanics already implemented, and have wanted to add those ideas in too. In this regard, you'll find some of these ideas included in DLC Pack 1, The Master Trials, which is out now, and in Pack 2, The Champions' Ballad, which is coming this winter. I hope you'll try and experience them yourself! ■

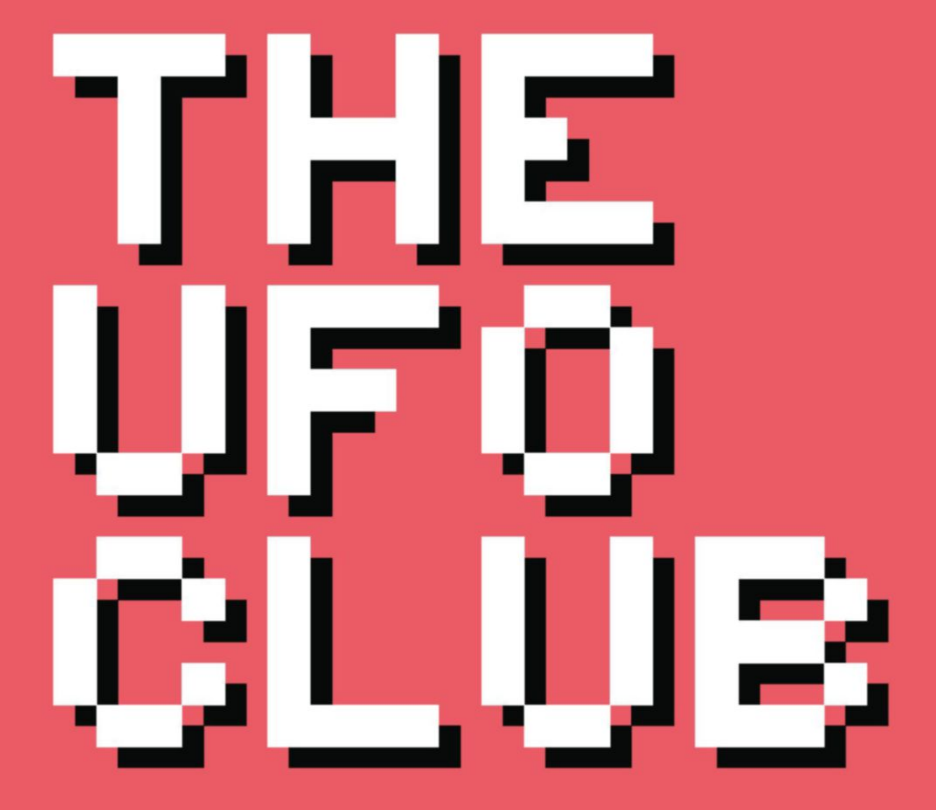


"When we start development on a new title for the Zelda series, we always set out to take on a new challenge"


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Fifty games. Five devs. A console that never existed. Welcome to the compilation exploring the history of the 1980s' best imaginary game studio

By Chris Schilling

This is the story of the most forward-thinking game developer you've never heard of. A company ahead of its time in both game design and narrative. A studio that could easily have revolutionised the medium had its games been released to the masses, but to which fate dealt a cruel hand. A team that should be feted by all modern creators – if it weren't entirely fictional, that is.

Officially, *UFO 50*'s story begins in 1983. In the real world, however, it started a few years later. In the second grade at school, **Derek Yu** met **Jon Perry**, and the two became fast friends, with a shared interest in games. "Some of my earliest memories of hanging out with Derek are basically just sitting down and drawing pages of items and enemies and things for games we didn't even know how ▶



Derek Yu

"Jon and I had a history of making small games. We even had a term for them when we were kids: we'd call them 'little craps'. They were mostly freeware games that went under people's radar – you'd pick them up, play them, and they usually had a very strong personality."

The current chronology is subject to change, with the final 15 games yet to be officially placed. *Traps*, however, is likely to stay first on the list: the team has consciously tried to make it feel older than the others

to program," Perry recalls. "So yeah, we have a long history."

It was with the release of Clickteam's 1994 game-making tool Klik & Play that the pair, then in their early teens, started working together in earnest. Yu and Perry started their own studio called Blackeye Software, and began to release small games as part of the Klik & Play community. "We'd spend a weekend or maybe a week on them and put them out," Yu tells us. "We got a good response back then and that's kind of how my game career got started."

By the time the two had released the last of these games, Klik & Play had been succeeded by Multimedia Fusion. In 2002, Yu and Perry released one final game under the Blackeye Software banner, freeware action-adventure *Eternal Daughter*, before the two went their separate ways. "We made a small iPhone game somewhere in the middle there, and maybe a few miscellaneous projects, but we didn't really work closely together on videogames for a while," Yu says. "There's this card game *Time Barons*, which is finally coming out this year," Perry adds. "But these were all hobby projects."

Around 18 months ago, Yu contacted Perry to discuss working together on a more ambitious project. Perry had spent the last five years away from videogames, finding himself more heavily involved with card and tabletop games, and so Yu encouraged him to learn Game Maker, with which he'd made the first version of *Spelunky*. "At some point during that conversation, it just hit me," Yu says, "If Jon was going to learn Game Maker and make some small games again, then why not just make a whole bunch of small games together and put them together into a package?"

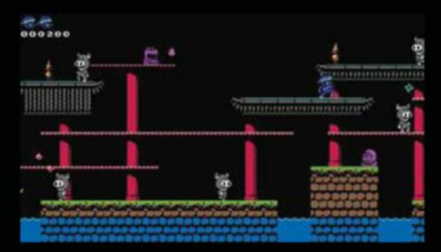
Fifty, Yu reckoned, felt like a good number. "It's a strong, solid, even number, and it's one that really packs a lot of punch," he laughs. "My reasoning was that, if we're going to be making small prototypes, why not make them into actual games that we can put into a compilation. I thought that would really give us a lot of freedom in terms of what the games are. Because then a single idea doesn't need to carry the whole project." Perry agrees. ▶

01 TRAPS 1983 ADVENTURE



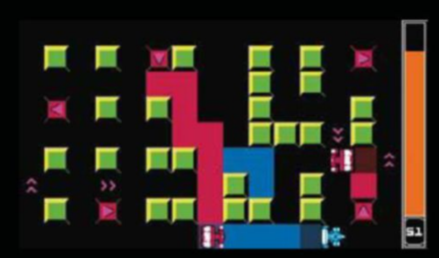
01 TRAPS
1983, Adventure, 1 player

Suhrke's slow-paced dungeon-crawler presents a stiff challenge, as a knight explores a hazardous labyrinth: the threat is summed up by a ceiling that collapses instantly if you head right from the start. It's one of Hubans' favourites: "It's one you have to sit down with and get immersed in."



02 NINPEK
1984, Shooter, 1-2 players

An auto-scrolling platform-shooter romp, in which a ninja (or two) explores fairly traditional environments, dodging hails of projectiles from decidedly non-traditional enemies, while collecting smiling eggs from those they defeat. Bullet-spewing serpents below present a stern test.



03 PAINT RACER
1984, Arcade, 1-2 players

Reminiscent of several top-down driving games of the era, this asks lone players to colour a maze by driving around it, while enemies trailing a different hue aim to outpaint you. Go-faster chevrons and transformative pickups keep you on your toes. Its two-player mode is even more compulsive.



04 DIABOLIKA
1984, Puzzle, 1 player

A remake of an iPhone game made by Yu and Perry in 2008, this fiendishly tricky puzzle game invites you to place bombs on a grid, triggering chain reactions to detonate monsters. You'll need to commit the explosive patterns of the bombs to memory, as the indicator disappears once placed.



05 FRAGILE PLATFORMS
1984, Platformer, 1 player

Scattered clouds and crumbling blocks are your only escape route from a row of spikes rising from the bottom of the screen. As the title suggests, you can't stay still for long, and flying creatures are also trying to halt your ascent. You have a gun but careless fire can leave you short of landing options.



06 BUSHIDO BALL
1985, Sports, 1-2 players

Air hockey with ninja and samurai, essentially, as you use swords to bat a puck back and forth, and rolls to cover the ground quicker. Each of the six playable characters has a special ability, from bombs to swords, though ludicrously capable AI opponents mean it's best played with two.



07 MOONCAT
1985, Platformer, 1 player

What looks like a perambulating sweet potato either avoids or bounces off enemies. The weird control scheme is the star: the D-pad moves you left, the buttons right; pushing both makes you jump – or, in mid-air, produce a ground-pound. It's oddly suggestive of *Donkey Kong: Jungle Beat*.



08 HYPER CONTENDER
1985, Sports, 1-2 players

Two outlandish characters fight to be the first to hit their opponent three times in single-screen arena battles. One is armed with a grapple and boomerangs; another has a portable lift and bombs; a third can shift gravity. Rope in a friend and this is potentially habit-forming.



09 BLOKKLE
1985, Puzzle, 1 player

Sokoban with a twist, as a cute bear pushes numbered blocks that come in pairs. A two can't be pushed into a three, but it'll yield if the order is reversed. Pushing a two into a one makes a three, solving the problem, and it all escalates from there. Sounds simple, but it's utterly absorbing.



10 CAMOUFLAGE
1985, Puzzle, 1 player

An ingenious stealth-based puzzler, in which a chameleon must rescue its offspring and gobble fruit while hiding from hungry toads. To stay safe, you'll need to change colour to match the squares in their sight lines. Straightforward? With a kid trailing behind, it's tougher than it looks.



11 ATTACTICS
1985, Strategy, 1-2 players

The first UFO 50 game Yu and Perry worked on, this combines match-three with tactics as two armies advance on their opponent's castle. Form a column of three and these endearingly chunky units will be powered up, but each turn is a race against the clock. Another multiplayer cracker.



12 KICK CLUB
1986, Arcade, 1-2 players

In which a footballer is tasked with defeating sports-themed enemies by booting a ball into their faces, before gathering the food they leave behind. With the ball's path hard to predict – and as likely as not to get stuck on a narrow platform – one life seems needlessly punishing. Not great.



Having so many games to make brought its own logistical problems

"It's such a freeing creative space to be in," he says. "I think that's what made the idea so appealing. Because we were struggling to find that one idea we were going to be comfortable marrying ourselves to for years, and this was more like a structure where we could work together and throw in a lot of ideas."

Yu and Perry quickly realised that this was going to be too much work for just two people. So Yu contacted **Eirik Suhrke**, who had composed music for *Spelunky* and had been dabbling in Game Maker since. In the interim, Suhrke had released an action-platformer named *Skorpulac*, in which you play a man exploring an enemy-filled labyrinth armed with just a spear, via indie web portal Warp Door. Impressed by the game, Yu invited his former colleague to take the next step and work with him on his new project. "Derek and Jon were already talking about it but it was definitely before they had started working on it," Suhrke recalls. "He mentioned it during the summer two years back and then we actually started working on it half a year later."

The trio set up a private forum to discuss the project, starting a thread to collectively brainstorm game concepts before splitting the workload three ways. "We were just throwing ideas out there – whatever we could come up with that sounded interesting," Yu says. "From there we pared it down to about 50 ideas, with each of us taking about a third. And that's basically how it got started." Still, they needed a hook. "Once you have a whole collection of games then the next obvious question is: what unites them?" Perry says. "And so we started thinking about what that would be."

Having so many games to make brought its own logistical problems, and it soon became apparent that the group would have to impose certain restrictions. Given the project's origins in Yu and Perry's past making tiny games together, and the strong influence of Nintendo during their formative years, the notion of these games being a collection made for a fictional retro console grew organically from there. It's an intriguing hook, and it has practical benefits, too. "What's nice about our framing story is that, yeah, it ties the games ▶



Jon Perry

"We're definitely coming to the project from different backgrounds. I've been immersed in the tabletop gaming world for the last five years more than the videogame world, so I'm bringing a lot of those elements to my games – whereas the other guys might have different reference points. We're mostly just making the types of games we want to play."

Godsblood **is one of three RPGs in the collection. "We wanted to have a good variety of games, and we did think a lot about [deliberately] covering different genres," Derek Yu says**



Eirik Suhrke

"It's really as simple as, 'Here's a cool idea I had, I'll make a little game like this.' In my case, sometimes I actually get game ideas from dreams. Like, I'll be playing a game in my dream and then I'll wake up and think, 'Wow, that was pretty cool, I should make that.'"

Shooter *Elfazar's Hat* is another of the 15 games that aren't yet playable. Yu: "If a game was in a familiar genre, we wanted it to have something unique about it, something that hadn't been done that particular way before"

together thematically," Perry says. "But also the colour limitations, the resolution limitations – these are all things that make development of the games go way faster, especially in terms of the art."

Once the idea had been established, the group started to think about what kind of console this could be. The NES was the most obvious inspiration, but to simply adopt its specifications wouldn't have made this imaginary device unique. So Yu, Perry and Suhrke studied the PC Engine, the MSX, and Japanese computers from the 1980s to influence the overall aesthetic – after which Yu began to assemble a 32-colour palette. "Philosophically, as far as choosing the colours goes, I didn't really have any ideas," he admits. "So I just started by throwing colours down that seemed to cover the spectrum: green for grass and trees, blue for sky and water, just colours that looked pleasing."

Another rule was then introduced: each sprite in the game would get black as a 'free' colour, along with three others chosen from the remaining palette. Still, it's one more than the NES gets. "We didn't want to limit ourselves *too* much," Perry tells us. "The flexibility that we have by making this in 2017 is that it's not any kind of actual technology that's limiting us. Instead, we're picking our own limitations. So the colours per sprite we made more permissive than games of that era."

Suhrke subsequently took Yu's work and made some refinements to create the palette *UFO 50* has now, and as the de facto composer, he established ground rules for the sound chip, which is essentially the same as the one found in the PC Engine. "It's six channels of wavetable, and I'm using one of them for sound effects, so there's five left for the music," Suhrke says – and it turns out he's particularly strict when it comes to operating within those self-imposed boundaries. "To me that's the most appealing part of the project," he elaborates. "I find that in general, it's easier to be creative and productive if you have limitations. The fun part is pushing against those boundaries, so I definitely don't bend the rules, but I do try to maximise what we have." ▶



13 SACRIFICE
1986, Platformer, 1 player

More like it. The first of two interpretations of a similar concept – pitched by Yu, directed by Perry – this sees you negotiating platforming gauntlets by deliberately dying to aid your successors: forming stepping stones and ladders, or detonating yourself to remove nearby obstructions.



14 CAMPANELLA
1986, Arcade, 1 player

The titular UFO game puts you in a tiny flying saucer, swiping at bubbles and enemies, and picking up bonus points by circling special objects in narrow spaces. With immaculately calibrated controls and an irresistible chiptune soundtrack, this is easily one of the compilation's standout games.



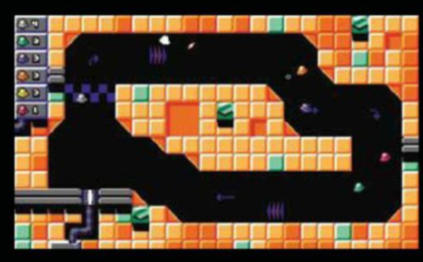
15 AVIANOS
1986, Strategy, 1-2 players

A quixotic turn-based strategy set on a 5x5 grid where you pray to one of a variety of dinosaur gods on every turn. Each deity offers a different benefit, letting you build, expand your territory, or recruit soldiers, archers or mages to defend your bases and attack your opponent's. Engrossing.



16 OVERBOLD
1986, Shooter, 1-2 players

This highly replayable shooter invites you to bet on your own abilities before entering a crowded arena to destroy enemies. Raise the stakes and more will appear, or you'll suffer a handicap. After two rounds, you'll spend your earnings on guns and perks ahead of a longer showdown.



17 UFO RACERS
1986, Sports, 1-2 players

If *Campanella* is UFO 50's *Super Mario Bros*, this is its *Mario Kart*. It's a brisk 10-lap circuit racer with random power-ups based on the same sublime controls and physics, with each smash returning you to the start line. Luck's role means it feels much fairer as a two-player game.



18 SUB HUNT
1986, Adventure, 1 player

An aquatic *Metroid*-style adventure with cute looks that belie a firm but fair challenge. Your wide-eyed submarine must plumb the depths, searching for upgrades to its fuel tank and torpedoes before returning to the surface to install them. A satisfying slow burner.



19 WALDORF'S JOURNEY
1987, Arcade, 1-2 player

You select your angle and power to propel a walrus through the air, hoping to land on one of a clutch of sparsely placed ice platforms. With no instructions, it seems impossible – until we realise you can add aftertouch, collecting fish to refill your meter mid-flight. It's still extremely hard.



20 ONION DELIVERY
1987, Arcade, 1 player

A delightfully single-minded top-down arcade game where you play an alien driving around a city delivering, well, presumably onions to drop-off spots highlighted on your radar. With your fuel steadily dwindling, you'll need to reach your next stop as quickly as possible without crashing.



21 GOLFARIA
1987, Adventure, 1 player

A tricksy Roguelike, after a fashion, in which you have 20 turns to whack a golf ball around, searching for holes that take you under- and back overground, while collecting clubs to reset and increase your stroke count. A fine concept, but it's overly fussy and the ball's roll is often hard to predict.



22 PARTY KING
1988, Strategy, 1 player

As a party planner you throw shindigs to earn popularity points, letting you expand the premises or add new guest types. You'll need to choose your contacts wisely: rowdy rock stars boost your profile but you risk alerting the cops; hippies will calm the mood. Esoteric, engaging stuff.



23 FIST HELL
1988, Beat 'em up, 1-2 players

One of the most conventional games in the package, this side-scrolling brawler sees your chunky fighter take on waves of gang members in the time-honoured fashion. It's more responsive and flexible than its would-be peers, letting you throw enemies into one another and down pits.



24 CARAMEL CARAMEL
1988, Shooter, 1 player

A charming five-stage scrolling shooter wherein a space fish blasts nasties that are far from shot-shy – it's not quite bullet hell, but the action gets busy quickly. Maintaining a steady stream of fire builds up a three-way charge shot while a snapshot special lets you freeze enemies for a score bonus.



"We're making this collection look as authentic as possible"



In other respects, however, some paring back has been necessary. As the backstory behind the console began to take shape, the team started to consider a chronology for the games, conscious of the kind of technological advances that made late-era NES titles look so much better than its earliest games. Pick from the bottom two rows of *UFO 50*'s menu screen, and you're more likely to see bigger sprites, more colours and parallax scrolling. Meanwhile some games have had more stringent limitations imposed upon them after the fact. "We may use just two colours plus black instead of three, to give some of them an older feel," Yu explains. "We're thinking about the whole history of this collection, and making it look as authentic as possible in that regard."

With 50 concepts nailed down, Yu, Perry and Suhrke realised a three-way split of the workload would still leave them stretched. So, a year ago, they welcomed two more developers to the team. Yu invited his friend, the designer and sprite artist **Paul Hubans**, to assist with level design. **Ojiro Fumoto**, creator of *Downwell*, came on board soon after, courtesy of Suhrke, who was responsible for *Downwell*'s music and sound design. Fumoto is mostly working on the games allocated to Suhrke, while Hubans' role involves fleshing out rough concepts from their nascent forms. "When they give me the games, they'll have a screen or two that's been built, and I have to go in and build the entire world," he says. "So if it's a platform game, for example, I have to think where the jumps should be, and how far apart things should be spaced. Level design is its own art, and it requires an extended level of attention that is really important."

Both have also been given a game each to direct. Hubans admits he wishes he was in charge of more than one, but his horror-themed point-and-click puzzle-adventure *Night Manor* is close to his heart. "When I think of that era, those adventure games were some of my favourites. I was really inspired by them and I wanted to have something similar in this project and Derek agreed." Meanwhile, as someone who grew up playing SNES games, Fumoto concedes that adapting to 8bit constraints has taken some time, as he takes ▶



Ojiro Fumoto

"I've always had the idea of making a shoot-'em-up where you could only move left and right, and I figured it would be fun to try to make *Seaside Drive* within the limitations of *UFO 50*. It's basically inspired by games like *Metal Slug* or *Contra*, just with less mobility for the player character."

Campanella **is one of two games to get a sequel within the compilation. "We knew from the beginning that we wanted some kind of franchise games in there," Perry says**



Paul Hubans

"I haven't really gotten a sense of friendly competition. I feel like there's such a strong sense of cooperation, and we all basically want the same things. We offer each other critique and sometimes we might resist the feedback, but in most cases it's considered. It seems like we're all in the same mindset with this project, which means it's flowing organically."

Horror-tinged point-and-click *Night Manor* immediately stands out among the bright arcade games in the collection, leaning on the more muted hues in its fictitious console's palette

charge of *Contra/OutRun* hybrid *Seaside Drive*. "I didn't really have a strong grasp on what these retro games looked and played like," he says. "The other devs would warn me when I went too far – when I put in a fancy effect, too many enemies on screen or too many background details, they would tell me that it's not really appropriate. So that in itself has been an interesting experience for me, to learn what the actual old games played or felt like."

This isn't simply nostalgia for nostalgia's sake. While the hope is that *UFO 50* will evoke the feeling of retro games, there are a few old-fashioned ideas that won't be present. Cheap deaths and clunky controls are out, in other words. "We definitely wanted contemporary game design to influence our games," Yu says. "And we were happy to use modern concepts like random level generation, for example – it was fine for us if this company felt like it was ahead of its time." These imaginary developers were not just progressive in design terms, either. Rescuing damsels in distress might have been a common narrative trope in the 1980s, but Yu and company are keen to steer clear of similarly retrograde ideas.

Currently, 35 of the 50 games are playable from start to finish; the team is hoping all 50 will be there or thereabouts by the year's end. After which comes polish and refinement – and, in some cases, tweaks to make the 'older' games seem more primitive. The lore is taking a back seat for the time being, then, though it continues to evolve: we ask Yu for a list of directors for the games, and he initially agrees before deciding he'd rather preserve some of the mystique around this enigmatic studio he and his colleagues have conceived.

There's still plenty of work to be done if it's to hit its planned launch late next year, then, though so far it's been a rather therapeutic process for its makers. "As a game designer, it's normal to have a ton of ideas – like, way more than you can possibly make," Perry says. "*UFO 50* has allowed me and everyone else to do some house-cleaning of some of those ideas we've been idly thinking over, and finally put them into practice." ■



25 SACRIFICE II

1988, Platformer, 1 player

Yu's own take on the kill-yourself-to-help-your-successor idea is more complex than the first, with 99 lives and five character classes – bomber, warrior, gunner, scout, engineer – pooling their abilities to collectively get you done. "We decided to make it a sequel after the fact," Yu explains.



26 DINO DEFENSE

1988, Strategy, 1 player

A tower defence game with dinosaurs, unsurprisingly, this doesn't have much more than its prehistoric theme to distinguish itself. As a cavewoman whose home lies at the end of a winding path, you place Neanderthal units along the route, upgrading them to throw spears, rocks and fire.



27 PIN GOLF

1988, Sports, 1-2 players

A Suhrke/Fumoto collaboration, this captivating combination of golf, pinball and pachinko is a favourite among the developers and was a big hit in the build Yu and company brought to PAX. Its side-scrolling courses are brilliantly designed and it already feels like a local-multiplayer classic.



28 STAR WASPIR

1989, Shooter, 1 player

A blisteringly-paced vertical shooter where you choose between two modes of fire – tapping the button for a wide spread or holding it to bring your projectiles into a narrower, more concentrated burst. Defeated enemies leave letters behind: collect EGG in that order for a multiplier.



29 QUIBBLE RACE

1989, Strategy, 1-2 players

Three aliens compete in a footrace that's anything but straight. Placing bets on the potential winner, you'll invest your earnings in sponsorship deals that offer bigger race rewards, or risk underhand tactics to guarantee victory – assuming they haven't been nobbled first. Darkly amusing.



30 SEASIDE DRIVE

1989, Shooter, 1 player

You hare along an auto-scrolling road in a sports car, accelerating to the right of the screen and braking to the left, while using the d-pad to fire at enemies all around. The twist? Drift by holding both buttons and you'll power up your projectiles, encouraging joyously daring powerslides.



31 RAKSHASA

1989, Platformer, 1 player

A handsome but fairly straightforward side-scrolling action game, where your sceptre-wielding hero faces a barrage of constantly spawning enemies, from angry lightning clouds to deadly plants. Hit floating purple orbs and they'll release goodies, with some providing superior firepower.



32 DISC LORDS

1989, Strategy, 1-2 players

Two disc armies lie at opposite ends of a battlefield, taking turns to damage a rival. Ogres present a large target, but their bulk makes it easier to hit two enemies at once; mice hurtle along at high velocity. Snookering an opponent by rebounding behind cover is incredibly gratifying.



33 UFO VR

1989, Shooter, 1 player

Moving around within a square playfield, your spinning craft shoots at enemies flying in from the background. The ones you miss later reappear from all four sides, as you press yourself against the edges of the narrow space to fire in the opposite direction. An intriguing brand of arcade shooter.



34 ANT WAR

198X, Strategy, 1 player

Something close to a demake of *Pikmin 3*'s multiplayer battles, this sees you controlling a lone blue ant while marshalling the rest of your group in skirmishes against more powerful red ants. Its position in the timeline hasn't yet been determined, hence the placeholder 198X date.



35 CYBER OWLS

198X, Platformer, 1 player

An entertainingly mindless platform brawler in which a musclebound hero with an owl's head yomps along, punching everything in his path. Seemingly a conscious pastiche of the era's rough-edged brawlers, for a 'bad' game, it has a pretty great jump.

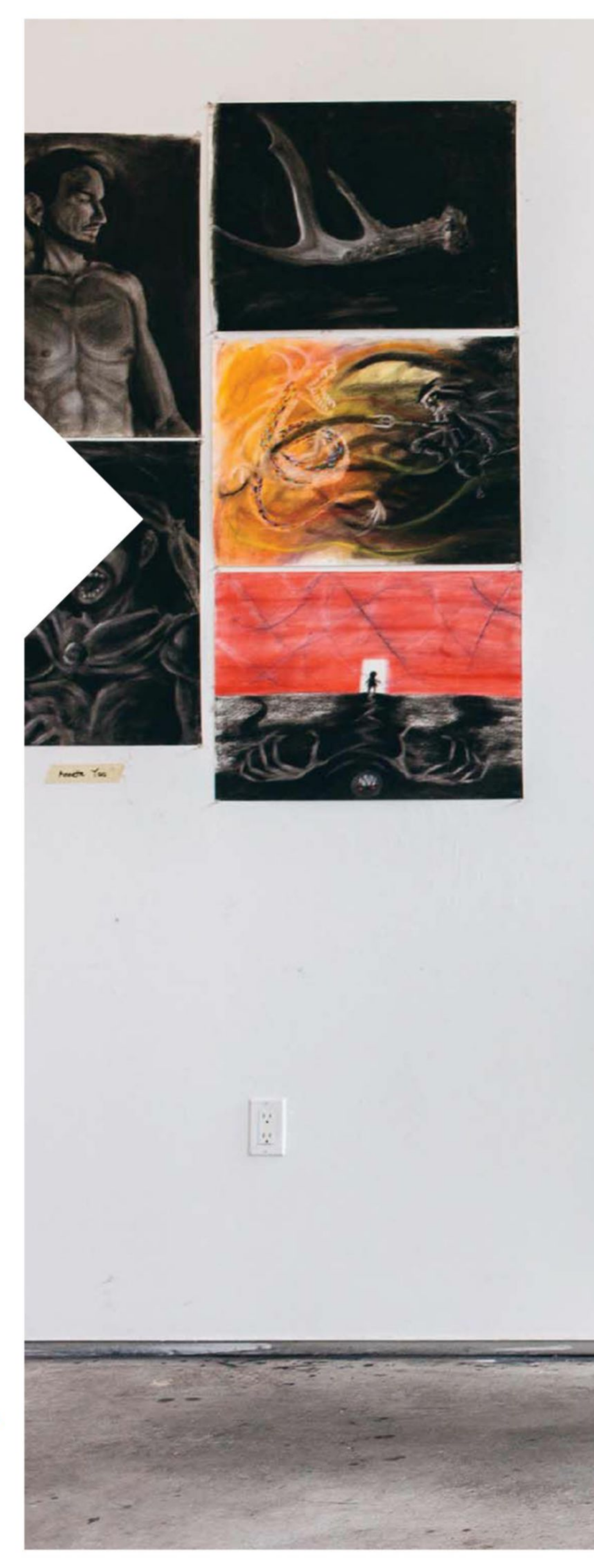
AN AUDIENCE WITH...

ROBIN HUNICKE

The award-winning game designer on the ethics of altering reality

By Jen Simpkins

Photography **June Kim**



Robin Hunicke's business card reads 'CEO/ Empath'. Indeed, there are many sides to the game designer. Best known for her work on *Journey*, she is now co-founder of experimental indie-game studio Funomena, currently preparing to launch VR and PC fairytale puzzler *Luna* while working on the typically wacky Keita Takahashi title, *Wattam*, due next year. She is also, by her own admission, the kind of person with "sensitive antennae: if I go into a room full of people, one of my first feelings is if someone is unhappy, I always know it."

Her work with modern videogame technology and her compassionate nature often clash and combine to creative effect. Here, Hunicke discusses *Wattam*'s return with new publisher Annapurna Interactive, her long-time friendship with Takahashi, and the technical, ethical and personal challenges of designing for virtual and augmented reality.


The Legacy of Mankind
destroying
the planet
OUR WAYS
to PREVENT



CV

Robin Hunicke's lifelong love of games led her to study computer science and begin a PhD in Artificial Intelligence, before she was recruited by Electronic Arts in 2005. There, she worked on *The Sims 2* and *MySims*, as well as Steven Spielberg's Wii puzzler *Boom Blox*. In 2009, Hunicke left EA to help Thatgamecompany create *Journey*. She and fellow *Journey* developer Martin Middleton went on to co-found Funomena in 2012, creating experimental and educational titles such as the FitBit-compatible *Terra* and Google Tango-enabled AR game *Woorld*. She runs two programs at UC Santa Cruz, co-organises the annual GDC Experimental Gameplay Workshop, and volunteers for more game jams, foundations and workshops than could possibly fit in one magazine column.

How does it feel to see *Wattam* out in the wild again? It all went quiet for a while there.
Everyone at the studio is thrilled to have it announced, and to be on the public side of development again. There have been ups and downs – making videogames is always a challenge. It's a very complicated title: it uses very complex physics to be able to be as open-ended and playful as it is. It's exciting because the simple premise of the game hides this intense, computational, interactive AI and physics system underneath.

When Keita [Takahashi] and I first started talking about *Wattam* years ago, it was a crazy idea inspired by playing with his two-year-old son. Keita's extremely curious, and he's always questioning. His question that he always asks is: "Why?" When you're making a videogame, you have to ask, "What's the point of making this game?" A lot of time, what Keita asks is, "Why are games the way they are? Why should the UI be this way? Why should the interactions be this way?" I mean, in *Wattam*, you explode to have fun.

The thing that he doesn't accept is limitations. The physics in *Wattam* are very hard to do. It's a series of arbitrary shapes at arbitrary scales, and arbitrary levels of zoom, and they can all interact with one another – climb on top of each other, hold hands, dance, animate, they have behaviours. If you took *Katamari* and *Noby Noby Boy* and had them have a baby, they'd make *Wattam*.

As a publisher, Annapurna Interactive seems to be a perfect fit for *Wattam*. How did that come about?
We had an existing relationship with them from before: I worked with Deborah [Mars] and Nathan [Gary] on *Journey*, so a lot of the staff at Annapurna are people who I've known for many years. We're really excited about the partnership, because they *get* these kinds of games. It's nice to collaborate with people that we trust, that really understand what experimental games are about, and who realise games take time – but that they also need boundaries. With a lot of publishers that are a struggle to work with, there's either infinite time, or there's infinite boundaries. Annapurna is really good at managing both, which I think is what makes them successful as a publisher.

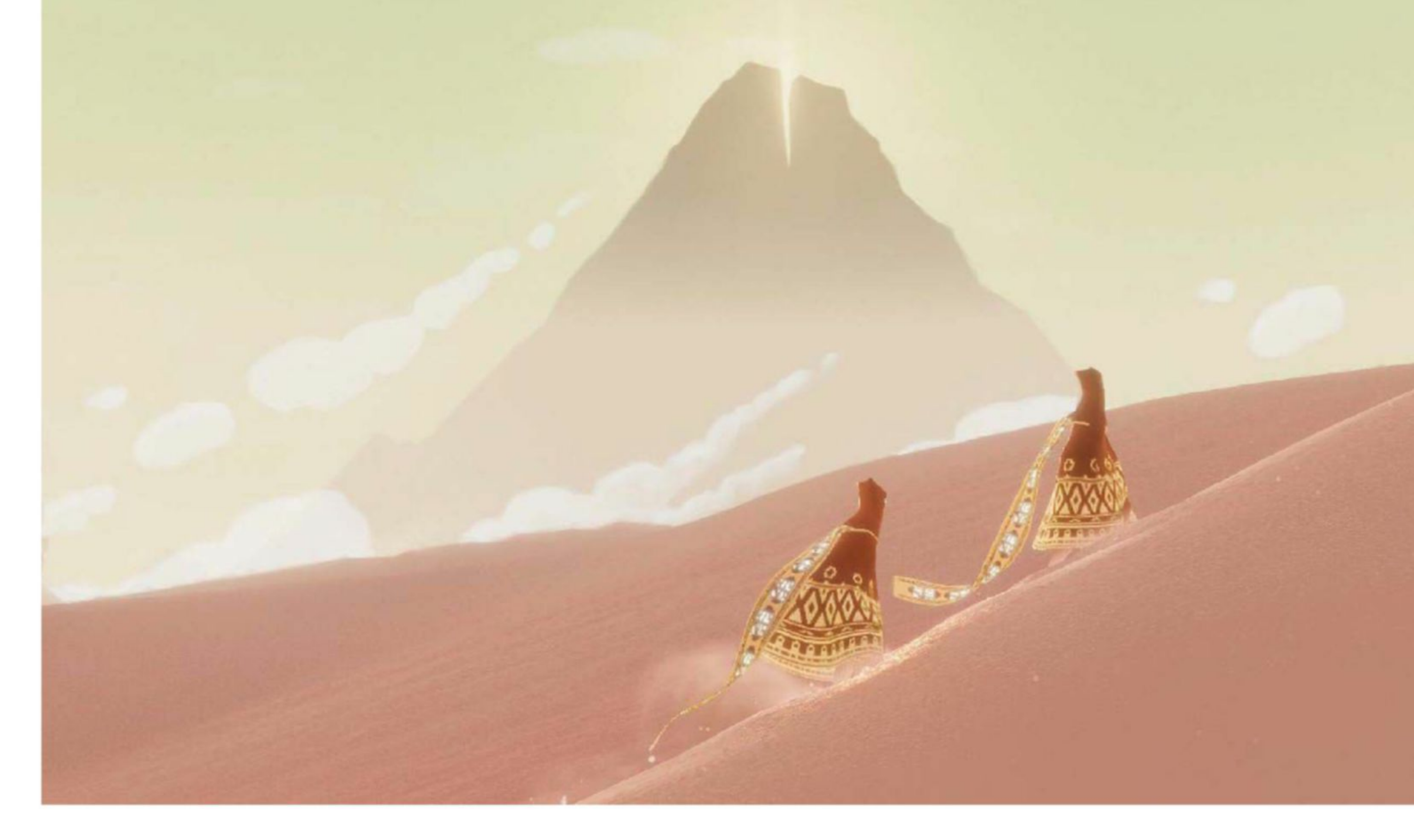
And also just having a fantastic group of titles. We were with *Kentucky Route Zero*, and *Donut County*, and *Gorogoa* at the PAX booth, and you couldn't ask for better company. They're all fantastic games, and all the developers are people that I consider friends. It's a real honour to be in that crew.

"TRIUMPH AND COMPETITION ARE GREAT, BUT THERE'S LOTS OF OTHER EMOTIONS ON THE PALETTE"

You've been working with Keita Takahashi for a long time. When did you first realise you wanted to collaborate with him?
The backstory for Keita and I is that when I was in graduate school, I was obsessed with Japanese games. I went to Tokyo Game Show in 2002: I had been reading about this 'dung beetle game' that was being published by Namco. I had seen screenshots in Famitsu. So my friend and I were cruising the floor trying to find it. We went over to the Namco booth and they had these little TVs inset into the wall with the controllers, and you could play this tiny version of it on a CRT. I played the game and immediately fell in love with the sound design, and the visuals. My friend [GDC director] Alan Yu helped us get in touch with Namco. Then we brought Keita over to speak about *Katamari* at the Experimental Gameplay Workshop at GDC.

He did a demonstration for GDC in March 2002. It was translated, because he didn't speak English at the time. At the end of that presentation, he showed the part where you roll up all the countries and the globe. He actually said that the September 11th attack on the Twin Towers had been really sad and terrible for him, that he was so worried about humanity, and our inability to get along with one another. He said that he was in some ways building this game to show us that the world is really small, and the universe is really big, and we need to love each other more. And everybody was crying. I was so moved.

That was the first time I ever met him in person, and I was already a huge fan of the game. In a way, our fates were sealed at that moment. We started exchanging letters through a translator and stayed in touch. And Keita and I visited each other several times. I went to Japan to see him, and to Nottingham, when he was working on the park that didn't ever get finished. I still



Hunicke helped create Thatgamecompany's online co-op adventure title *Journey*, which released in 2012

have a maple leaf from it. I was there in the fall, he had this little tiny cottage he was working out of and it was freezing. Someday we'll get that park made.

I had finished *Journey*, and he asked me to help him with this game that he was working on. We ended up collaborating on *Glitch*. Then it became pretty clear that that game wasn't going to ship. It was awesome, but Stuart [Butterfield] was already working on Slack, and there were other things going on. So eventually Keita said, "Can we collaborate and make a cool thing?"

When we first founded Funomena, one of the first things I did was apply for him to get a Visa to be able to move here from Vancouver. A lot of lovely people in the industry wrote letters and helped us get that done. He moved to San Francisco when we incorporated. If you look on my Instagram feed, the day that we got the keys to the office, there's a photo of Keita drawing some of the characters for *Wattam* and putting them up on a whiteboard. I still look back at that picture. He's been with us ever since, so it's been exciting to be able to get the word out about the project, and get a Steam page up. It's been a long time cycling up the hill, and now we're kind of cresting and going back down the hill.

What makes *Wattam* a Funomena game?

It's about making friends with different kinds of people, and then doing things with them that are fun, to draw different people into the world. So you start off in a world that's pretty lonely, and you meet a little rock, and then you meet the rock's parent, and then eventually the sun comes out. And then after the sun comes out, you start meeting flowers, and eventually food items. As you start expanding the world, and bringing new people into it, the world gets richer and more unexpected, and more playful.

That is, in a sense, how I think of Funomena. We're trying to draw interesting people out of the woodwork. A lot of people come to us after having a career in a more corporate environment. Our Funomenauts have a broad range of pursuits and interests, so when everybody gets together and tries to problem-solve, then the space explodes into some really great ideas. *Wattam* is a good analogy for what it takes to build something creative, which is lots of different people working together to figure out the best way to explode the problem.

And how does your VR-compatible fable, *Luna*, represent Funomena's values?

We really want the medium of games to expand beyond what we currently know and are good at. I believe in experimental game design, and so I want *Luna* to be our entree into a broader audience that is engaged with the concepts of creativity, curiosity, beauty and mystery – as well as triumph and competition. Triumph and competition are great, but there are lots of other emotions on the palette.

I think it's important to build games and experiences in VR and AR and mixed reality that expand beyond this notion that everything is about winning and losing. Some things can't be won, and if you do something in your life that didn't turn out the way you expected, you learn from it and then you incorporate it into who you are. Then it becomes a piece of you. I think this is something that we really need to acknowledge as a society and learn how to talk about.

Especially men – they don't get encouraged to express their feelings very often, they don't get told about the kinds of strategies they can employ with friends and loved ones, and animals and nature, to really relax. We have a culture where it's okay for girls to say ▶

Luna, which launches October 17, takes the form of a fable. You play as a bird, tricked by a sly owl into swallowing the last piece of the moon

"We need a spa day and some wine, I'm going to take care of myself", but not men. It's not fair to have half of our population not have the freedom to talk about their feelings and ask for help. One of the things that's great about games is that we have a strong capacity to engage people across a variety of genders, experiences and cultures in thinking about what play means and how playfulness enriches our lives.

How does designing for VR differ from designing for traditional systems?

With the new headsets, these platforms are going to make it easier for people to experience augmented reality or VR in a way that's cost-effective. Opening up into that space on the design side, we're really used to showing you where to look in PC and console games. We're used to controlling where your gaze is, and using that to tell a story in a very heavy-handed way. In *Luna*'s VR version, we need to engage your body. We need you to want to reach out and touch the bird to get it to do something, to put your energy into the space, so we thought a lot about the controllers and the body as a programmable space. When you hold normal controllers, they feel much more like a power grip: what you would use for a hammer on a nail. When you make a fist, you get a physical sensation in your body. When you use the precision grip [with the Oculus Touch controllers], like you would if you were drawing or putting on makeup, it feels very relaxed and delicate.

Up until now, we designers haven't been able to really pay attention to your body. It's so easy to press a button and shoot a projectile. You're really piloting a tank that looks like a person, and shooting stuff out of it. We're good, as game designers, at doing that game. Sometimes it's fun, and we have *Ratchet & Clank*-style characters doing it. Sometimes it's less fun and more intense – dudes getting stabbed or kicked or pushed or blown up. Doing that to one another. When you put yourself in a headset and immerse yourself in a space, it just becomes all the more clear that that kind of adrenaline is [only] appropriate at times. I would not want to be immersed in it all day. It's exhausting. We have a friend, Steve [Johnson], who was doing sound design on *Journey*, then moved onto a more violent game – and he left, eventually. He took off.

Have you personally had stressful experiences using VR and AR?

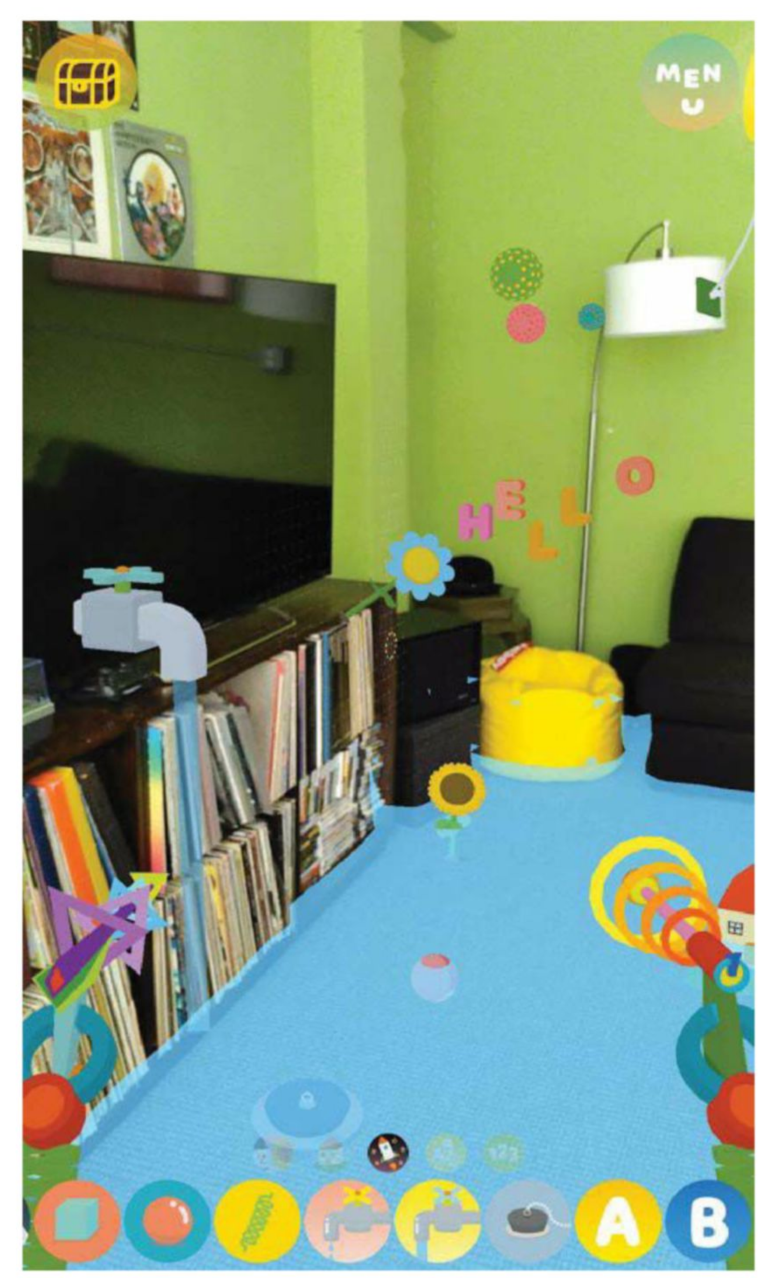
When you blend the world with the space, the virtual objects suddenly become real in your memory. If there's a little *Neko Atsume* kitten over there and I pet it, when I come home and look at the table, I will virtually see the little neko. And then I'll want to play the game. This is a way to hook people into wanting to do stuff. With *Neko Atsume*, you just want to go and see if you got the baseball cat or whatever. But what if that game was about an act of violence which took a wife and child from someone's family? Every time when you came home, you would look at the token that represented that. It would still make you want to play, but it would also fill your home with that feeling. I have had experiences in augmented reality where something violent or scary happened in the room over my shoulder, and then when the headset was off, I felt tense about looking back at that same space. It's not easy for your brain to decouple simulation from reality in your memory when you can see the stuff layered over your space.

Which is why *Woorld* is so silly, our AR title we released for Google's Tango phones. It has mushrooms and rainbow poos – I mean, it's a Keita game. But all the games we make at Funomena are about whimsy and ▶



Designed by Steven Spielberg, Wii physics puzzler *Boom Blox* was Hunicke's main project during the mid-2000s


la Variété by Weekend



Funomena title *Woorld* works with the AR functionality of Google Tango smartphones to decorate your space with animated, interactive toys. It won the prize for Best AR Experience at this year's Google Play awards

"RIGHT NOW, I FEEL VERY UPSET THAT THERE'S SO MANY PEOPLE IN THE WORLD THAT ARE MAD AT EACH OTHER"

play, from the perspective of exploratory, intergenerational play on the couch, or building something and taking a beautiful screenshot of it and sharing it with a friend.

It sounds like you feel a sense of responsibility, now that you're making games for this kind of technology.

Absolutely. It's only gotten stronger as I've gotten older and realised the importance of the messages we shape our society with. There's a book by Marshall Rosenberg called Nonviolent Communication: the whole theory is that if you look at the amount of valuative language that's common in a society, versus the amount of observational language, you'll find that there's more violence in society where judgement and valuation are promoted by our language. So an example would be, "Brad is ugly", or you could say, "Brad's looks don't appeal to me". They're both saying the same thing, but one is mean. One takes ownership over the fact that we all have preferences and tastes. But when we use language like, "You're a loudmouth", that's word violence – it's framing the environment in a way that makes responsibility not rest with you and rest outside of your body in someone else. It's what allows us to say, "I'm upset because you..." when really, you're upset because 'me'.

Luna is going to be a nice thing that you can spend time with. But, just like a children's book, it has concepts where as you get older, you start to realise, 'Maybe I *do* feel a scribble in my belly', that maybe there is some anxiety, fear or frustration inside of me, and if you can locate it and put words to it without putting it on other people, the likelihood of you getting your needs met is much, much higher. Right now, I feel very upset that there are so many people in the world that

are so mad at each other, and so many people that feel that violence is the answer. It's disturbing to me.

How do you make the level of immersion that VR offers a positive experience?

In *Luna*, you can see the terrarium manifest in front of you as a little ball. The changes in scale read much more physically to the body in VR. When you're playing on the PC, you're not going to look up to see the bird leave the terrarium. This is something that we've deliberately designed to cause the player to be more open with their body, as they move from here, to here, and then there.

We've also spent a lot of time thinking about the music. Austin [Wintory] is writing the score, and it is a memorial score for his father, so there's a lot of emotion attached with the music. We've had a lot of conversations about this idea of fraying, or breaking apart. The moon is a metaphor: it breaks apart and goes inside of the animal. Until the pieces come out, the animal is not well. This idea that there's pieces that have broken apart, that have some resonance with one another – that's a way that music can be. Then there's this other way, where it's integrated and connected to itself, and whole. And so the curves of the experience, and the way that you move down into the terrarium and see the intimate moment with the animals, and then come back out again – for me, it's like the waves of intimacy you feel with something that's bothering you.

If you're going through the phases of grief, there are days when you're fine. And then something triggers you and you're really sad. I recently lost someone, my friend Edward – he was kind of like my second dad. I was visiting his wife Sharon, and there would be moments where we would just suddenly remember that he wasn't there. That's what happens. And then she'd say, "Well, he's with us right now." It's those moments when you remember, okay, the way to frame this is that he's saying hi. It makes it feel better. As you get older and you see the same kinds of pain over and over in people's lives, I do think that it makes you want to build things that help.

How important is it for you to have as many people as possible interact with this kind of emotive experience in VR?

Oh, very. This is why I'm so excited about our partnership with Microsoft. I think it's very likely that we're going to see the technology rapidly expanding to be more accessible. Over the next year or three, there are going to be headsets that are easier to use, available at lower price-points. It'll no longer be about the limitation of the technology or its expense, it'll be about the content.

It is critical for us as an industry to embrace the fact that it is as broad as we want to make it. You can imagine a world where there's one princess, and everybody else is fighting the dark side in the galaxy with her. Or you can imagine a world where there's people of all different sizes, shapes and colours, people that come from all walks of life, who are all different genders with different preferences, all working together to solve something that's much more insidious than just one bad guy. Because there's no such thing as just one bad guy. It's more often the case that the enemy is within.

This is our time to make titles that address that stuff. This is the moment where you have to ask yourself: what's the point of making videogames when the world is falling apart? My answer is always, it's the same as painting or writing a sonnet, or composing a beautiful score, or cooking a meal for someone. It's that compassion that's critical. ■

Keita Takahashi's silly but technically complex *Wattam* was announced all the way back in 2014. It's due next year



THE MAKING OF...



STARDEW VALLEY

How one man went back to nature for an unlikely viral hit

By Chris Schilling

Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
Developer ConcernedApe
Publisher Chucklefish
Origin US
Release 2016

Eric Barone's favourite game series was stuck in a rut. By his reckoning, *Harvest Moon* had lost what had made the earlier games – the SNES original for which he'd first fallen, and his personal favourite, PlayStation entry *Back To Nature* – so special. He began to look for some kind of replacement, trawling through various fangames to little avail. There was only one thing for it: he'd have to make one of his own. "I guess I just hoped there were other people out there who felt the same as me, who were looking for this sort of thing," he tells us.

It was a natural next step for Barone, who had already considered games as the ideal way to satisfy his creative urges. An avid artist, musician and writer of stories and poetry, he'd never quite imagined that he'd be able to make a living from his hobbies. But with a bachelor's degree in computer science under his belt, he realised he had all the tools he needed. And now he had an idea to drive him forward.

Stardew Valley did, however, take quite some time to come together. As he started development, Barone had little meaningful experience, and a Steam release seemed beyond his capabilities. Xbox Live's Indie Games service appeared to be his best option. Barone was already using Microsoft's XNA programming framework, which was well-suited to making console games, and he believed he could clear XBLIG's comparatively low quality bar, sell his game for a dollar or two, and move on. Obviously things didn't quite pan out as he'd planned. After working on the game for a while, Barone built a website to document his progress, posting regular updates and attracting a small audience of regular followers. "That there were people out there who were really interested in what I was doing, and seeing that they would love a game like this, inspired me to go further," he says.

Before long, he'd noticed a clear improvement in his skills as a developer. His pixel art was getting better; likewise his programming. Which meant an obvious discrepancy between ideas he'd worked on earlier in development and those that came later. "At some point I realised that this game wasn't good enough; that I could do better," he recalls. "So I went back and redid it all. I went through that process many times throughout development – I'd go back and redo everything again to get it up to the level that I was at presently."



Barone says he didn't want to be influenced by playing other indie games while making *Stardew Valley*

Cashflow was a concern, of course. Barone had a part-time job as a theatre usher to supplement his girlfriend's grad-school income so they could scrape by, but the rest of his time was spent working on the game. "There was definitely pressure to make money, and so I guess that was one motivator," he laughs. Barone had consciously isolated myself from the independent scene throughout development, but he was aware that the likes of *Minecraft* and *Terraria* had benefitted from its makers being active online. Having publicly announced the game in the autumn of 2012, he took to Twitter and Reddit to further discuss his work, and to more directly engage with the community that was steadily growing around the game. "I had a sense that this was what you were supposed to do, but it was just natural for me to do it," he says. "I like to be personal with people who are interested in my game, to treat them like real people. And a big part of the charm of *Stardew Valley* is that it's a personal game. I felt that interacting with people in a straightforward way, with no PR-speak, made sense."

> "THERE WAS DEFINITELY PRESSURE TO MAKE MONEY, SO I GUESS THAT WAS ONE MOTIVATOR"

Still, he did have some help getting the message out. By now, *Stardew Valley* had attracted the attention of publisher/developer Chucklefish, which offered to help Barone with promotion and marketing. "They weren't involved in development at all, just the business side of things," he says. "Them tweeting about the game and promoting it a little bit helped start the ball rolling, and at that point people who knew *Harvest Moon* started to learn about it, and many of them thought it was cool, and shared it with their friends and so on."

Barone was a little uncomfortable, however, with *Stardew Valley*'s growing virality. The game was in a distinctly unvarnished state at the time, and inevitably he'd begun to attract his fair share of internet vitriol. "There were plenty of people back then that were saying, 'Oh, this is just a *Harvest Moon* rip-off, it's garbage'," he laughs. "But I kept improving it and the more I did that, the more I polished it and made it its own thing, I noticed people were saying that sort of thing less and less."

Among the barbs, he found plenty of constructive feedback, which helped shape the direction of the game. Barone's monthly update posts would attract a barrage of comments, and he'd read every one and try, wherever possible, to accommodate any popular feature requests. Community pressure took him down the occasional cul-de-sac: he'd stoked excitement among his community by telling them he was building procedurally generated open-world mines, but having spent several months working on them, he had to scrap them in favour of a more hand-crafted approach. "I'd got about 75 per cent of the way with that; I had goblin cities and all kinds of things in there," he says. "But then it turned out that it wasn't fun, and it was full of bugs." Still, he feels the feedback he got from his audience was a net positive. "Sometimes listening to the community led me astray a bit, but overall it was important to get some outside perspective on what I was doing, and to incorporate that into the final product."

Even while responding to – and acting upon – fan requests, Barone was keen not to lose sight of his original vision. He resurrected the easily understandable tile-based farming of the earlier *Harvest Moon* games, but he was also chasing something rather less tangible. "It's hard to even put my finger on, but there was a certain magic to those earlier games, just a feeling you got when playing them, that I wanted to capture," he says. Frustrated at the series' lapses into cliché and anime tropes, he aimed to ▶

evoke the idealistic outlook of *Back To Nature*, but also to echo its thematic maturity – though he concedes that perhaps its hidden depths are rose-tinted memories. "Maybe it wasn't actually that deep, but when you were a kid it felt like it was hinting at a lot of stuff. There were adult problems that characters had – some people drank too much, things like that. My intention with *Stardew Valley* was that it was for people my age, so I wanted to have themes that were compelling to adults but at the same time maintain a certain lightheartedness to keep it fun and relaxing."

Though he was hoping to recapture the spirit of *Back To Nature*, Barone didn't simply want to remake the game; rather, he wanted to add to it, to refine its ideas. One of the key changes he made was to the cooking mechanics. Instead of cooking for profit, farmers are encouraged to make meals that convey a range of character buffs, making their daily routines more efficient. "I wanted things to have purpose," he says. "In *Harvest Moon*, the point of making different meals would really be to ship one just so you have a complete shipping record – and of course some of the townsfolk might prefer a specific meal. But I felt it would be more fun if you had a real incentive to do it."

Despite these additions, Barone was still concerned *Stardew Valley* might be considered a little too close to its biggest inspiration for comfort. "Yeah, I was definitely worried," he admits. "For a long time I thought I was going to get sued. Though this was before I fully understood copyright law." It was, then, a relief when he eventually met Yasuhiro Wada, *Harvest Moon*'s creator, and found not only a kindred spirit, but an appreciative fan: "I thought Mr Wada would be mad at me. But he was a really nice guy, he liked *Stardew Valley*, and thought it was great that someone was taking his idea and continuing it." Perhaps, we suggest, Wada had moved on from the series with which he'd made his name for similar reasons to Barone. "He basically said as much, yeah," he nods. "We discussed the tile concept and he said that in the more modern games they keep getting smaller and smaller, whereas in the original *Harvest Moon* the tiles were nice and big and easy to work with, so you could wrap your head around it."

Barone wrapped up development in early 2016, releasing the PC version of *Stardew Valley* in February. His initial hope that there might be enough like-minded people seeking an old-school farming game was not misplaced: by the end of 2016 his game wasn't far short of selling its two millionth copy, having comfortably outstripped the likes of *Dishonored 2* and *Mafia III* in both sales and revenue on Steam. He'd already told friends he'd be "ecstatic" if the game managed to shift 100,000 copies over its lifetime; this was well beyond his wildest dreams. "At that point, I had no idea what was going on," he laughs.

He was still keen to continue working on and improving *Stardew Valley*, but success quickly proved overwhelming. Barone was too busy with bug fixes, patches and updates to think about the future of the game, or to develop any kind of business plan. Chucklefish duly stepped in and offered its assistance, which he gladly accepted. The publisher ported the game to PS4 and Xbox One – with Barone merely having to approve any changes – and translated the game into six languages besides English. It also connected him with merchandisers, while the multiplayer component he'd hoped to include with the original release is on its way, and will feature in the forthcoming Switch version. "It's all the stuff I basically don't want to do, because I just like to make games," he says. "I like to create the art, the music, the story – that's the kind of thing I like doing, not the highly technical stuff. Chucklefish has taken over all of that for me and I really appreciate it. It's been a big help."

He admits, with disarming candour, that even now he's surprised at *Stardew Valley*'s reception – especially when he plays other indie games. "Like *Hollow Knight*, which I'm playing right now. Some of these games are like beautiful works of art, whereas *Stardew Valley* is very scrappy, it's very amateur, and somehow everyone loves it." We suggest that in that regard it has something in common with the likes of *Terraria* and *Minecraft*, both of which proved phenomenally popular despite – or perhaps as a result of – their comparatively rudimentary looks. "Yeah, I agree with you," he replies, "And that was certainly intentional." He pauses momentarily. "I guess it makes some kind of sense in retrospect. I obviously love games like *Harvest Moon* and *Animal Crossing*, but I wasn't sure that it would be *mainstream* popular, you know?"

In a sense, Barone's journey mirrors that of *Stardew Valley*'s protagonist. As an outsider you must build your farm up from scratch, toiling away over a substantial period of time, suffering setbacks and making mistakes before you can eventually reap the rewards of your efforts. It's a game that rewards passion and good old-fashioned graft: two attributes that got Barone where he is now. "It didn't really come together until the very end," he says. "I spent a few months adding little flourishes and details to things, like woodpeckers pecking on the trees and stuff like that. *That* was when I started to think, 'OK, this game is pretty special, it has that [*Harvest Moon*] magic to it'. And it's a big game. I mean, it's kind of crazy how much content there is." He laughs, almost in disbelief. "Man, it was a lot of work." ■



Eric Barone
Designer/programmer/artist/composer

The absence of a time limit is a key change from *Harvest Moon*. Why did you remove it?
Pretty early on, I just thought, 'Why should there be a time limit?' I thought people might want to play for a long time, and I didn't really see a good reason to keep it. Also, I was influenced by open-ended modern PC games where you're able to keep playing, beyond any sort of storyline, just for the sake of creativity and doing things your own way.

What was the biggest challenge you faced during development?
Staying focused was challenging at times. I never felt like I was going to quit or not finish it, the question was just when. One difficulty was writing the dialogue. Because of the way *Stardew Valley* works, people will say things on certain days – but they could be anywhere in the world when they say it. So you can't really use any sort of environmental context, you can't have them commenting on their surroundings. It all has to apply to any sort of situation, and then you have to write a great many of those for each character. And, of course, multiplayer, which I had promised would be in the game at release, but it ended up just being very difficult for me to do on my own, and I had a fully functioning and fun singleplayer game ready.

Given *Harvest Moon*'s long lineage on Nintendo hardware, it seems fitting to have *Stardew Valley* on Switch.
Yeah, definitely. I'm a big fan of Nintendo, and I'm excited for it. And [GBA entry] *Friends Of Mineral Town* is basically the same game as *Back To Nature*. I think those are the best *Harvest Moon* games.



Kari Fry

1 It may have taken longer than he anticipated, but Barone stayed true to his original concept. "I wanted to capture this magical feeling of being in an idyllic country setting," he says.
2 Pelican Town's community centre is rather run-down when you move to Stardew Valley, but by making regular donations to the forest spirits that live there, you're eventually able to renovate it.
3 There are a dozen potential spouses in the game, and more than twice as many villagers you can't marry besides. Barone significantly refined his sprite work over the course of development.
4 Artwork for a small selection of the game's many animals, vegetables and minerals. There are more than 50 types of fish alone: when Barone says he planned to make a modern *Harvest Moon* game with "more content", he clearly wasn't kidding.
5 Museum curator Gunther is essentially the Blathers of *Stardew Valley*. Unlike most villagers he won't take gifts, but will gratefully accept any donations to the museum's collection



STUDIO PROFILE

FLASHBULB GAMES

How the makers of *Max & The Magic Marker* built themselves a new studio

By Alex Wiltshire



Founded 2016
Employees 22
Key staff Rune Dittmer (managing partner), Ole Teglbjærg (head of production), Mikkel Thorsted (creative director)
URL www.flashbulbgames.com
Selected softography (As Press Play) *Max & The Magic Marker*, *Max: The Curse of Brotherhood*, *Kalimba*
Current projects *Trailmakers*

The founders of Press Play needed just a month to open a new studio after Microsoft closed the doors on their first. They had to move fast. If they wanted to keep old colleagues together, they needed to grab them before they dispersed into new jobs elsewhere. But they already had the furniture from Press Play's old office – and all its IP, too.

Copenhagen-based Press Play was the maker of a series of superbly polished and colourful games that embraced physics and player creativity, starting with *Max & The Magic Marker*, which launched on Nintendo's WiiWare store in 2010. This platformer asked players to draw objects into the game world with the Wii Remote and it went on to be released on iOS, PlayStation 3, PC and Nintendo DS. It was enough to attract the attention of Microsoft, which bought the then 20-strong studio in 2012.

"In a weird and non-indie way, we believe that we will have more creative freedom with Microsoft Studios than we have ever had before," the studio said in its announcement of the deal. While Press Play stayed small, reaching only 35 staff, it stretched to develop original games for Windows Phone and a sequel to its debut release, *Max: The Curse Of Brotherhood*. It also attempted to embrace the new wave of open development in 2015 when it placed development decisions in the hands of the public, putting three game concepts to an open vote.

Press Play never completed the winner, *Project Knoxville*. In March 2016, with just four days' notice, Microsoft closed the studio. Coming at the same time as Microsoft's shuttering of Lionhead, Press Play was a victim of major changes Microsoft was making to its gaming division, explained in a way rather damning to those on the receiving end of it. A statement read: "These changes are taking effect as Microsoft Studios continues to focus its investment and development on the games and franchises that fans find most exciting and want to play." Ouch.

"We always knew an organisation like this could make changes," creative director **Mikkel Thorsted** tells us. "We knew it could happen."

"I don't think you can ask studio management to consider it for a month after the decision is made," says managing partner **Rune Dittmer**. "I don't think there's anything that should have been done differently." And Flashbulb's founders say Microsoft made the closure as painless as possible, letting them retain the studio's IP, allowing them to release their Windows Phone games on Android and iOS, and okaying the forthcoming PS4 release of *Max: The Curse Of Brotherhood*.


Flashbulb Games' founding group: (from left) Ole Teglbjærg, Mikkel Thorsted, and Rune Dittmer

They could also have continued making *Project Knoxville*. But at their new studio, Flashbulb Games, the three founders – Dittmer, Thorsted and head of production Ole Teglbjærg – wanted to make something else. *Trailmakers* is a physics-based building game in which players construct vehicles to explore a large world, finding new parts and designing them into new cars, planes and boats. They saw in the concept a game that fully embraced open-studio game development, releasing early, inviting feedback; a sandbox game that wasn't shackled to a story, featuring multiplayer and the emergent play that comes from letting players explore complex systems.

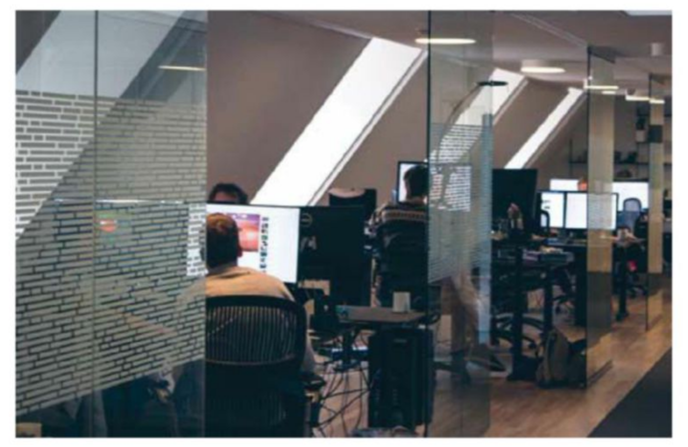
"It was important for us to do it 'the modern way'," Thorsted says, "getting feedback super early, getting out there with some real audiences and trying to involve them, and also to validate it. We had just come out of making [Xbox One puzzle-platformer] *Kalimba*, which was a great game that reviewed very well, but nobody seemed to care about it. Having done that, it was important that we could validate up front that we were working on something that would resonate with an audience."

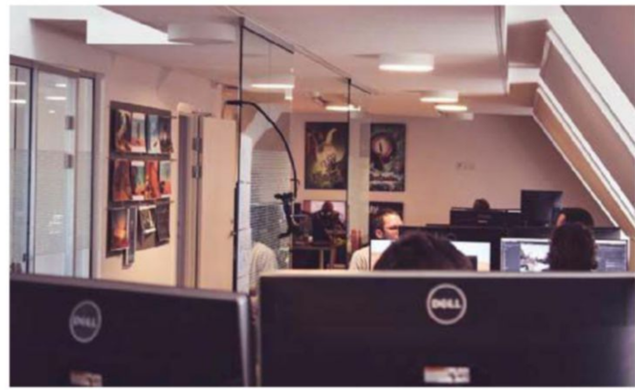
Thorsted, Dittmer and Teglbjærg have followed the industry's many twists and turns. They founded Press Play back in 2006, having just graduated from university, in order to make Flash games. Flash *was* the indie scene back then, and the ease of prototyping suited the group's interest in exploring new mechanics and developing at a fast pace. They also learned how to work with clients. "To develop your craft you have to convince somebody that it's a good idea and that they should pay you for it," Thorsted says. "It helped us when we started at Microsoft; we were used to not having the final say. We always knew how to work with people around us in order to make the games." Press Play's real strength lay in its ability to mix pragmatism with creativity. Dittmer says that one of the most valuable lessons they learned as Flash developers was how to finish games and deliver them. "Of course, quality is important, but we need to be able to finish off what we do, and we've always been good at that."

"QUALITY IS IMPORTANT, BUT WE NEED TO BE ABLE TO FINISH OFF WHAT WE DO, AND WE'VE ALWAYS BEEN GOOD AT THAT"

They also had a talent for taking newly popular concepts and using them to make something more approachable and game-like, as opposed to toy-like. *Max & The Magic Marker* was inspired by *Line Rider* and *Crayon Physics* – popular 2D games that took players' scribblings and made them part of the game's world. In sanding down the rough edges of the precursors and tying them to a beautifully presented platformer, they made something new; something that stood out on WiiWare, and still did by the time its sequel came to Xbox One, where Max's family-friendly approach was boosted by firstparty production values.

In many senses, Press Play is trying to do the same thing now with *Trailmakers*. "With *Max & The Magic Marker*, we developed the drawing mechanic and we'd sit around having fun making stacks of boxes and things, but that game became magic the day we put in the platform character, a guy you can be," says Thorsted. "That's the point it became a game and not just a sandbox, and it's the same thing we want to ▶





Flashbulb's studio stretches the thin length of the fourth floor of an old building in the centre of Copenhagen, a stone's throw from Press Play's former headquarters

do with *Trailmakers*, making sure the sandbox is super fun and a place where people will spend a ton of time making weird things and exploding them. For us it's important there's character to the world, a theme and more classic gameplay."

"There's a purpose and an objective to what you do," continues Dittmer. The games that *Trailmakers* is looking towards are PC sandbox construction games such as *Terratech*, *Scrap Mechanic* and *Besiege*. "We don't necessarily add something particularly new to that mix," admits Thorsted. Instead, Flashbulb's aim is to apply all the team has learned about broad accessibility and world-building. The game, which at the time of writing is in closed alpha, features *Trailmakers*' core mode, Expedition, which gently leads players through the world by placing new components in such locations as the top of steep-sided hills, inviting them to invent a vehicle able to reach them. The new component is often then the key to getting to the next one, perhaps on a steeper hill.

But Flashbulb has most recently been working on its multiplayer, which aims to blend the freewheeling sandbox with directed accessibility. Though players will also be able to explore together, Flashbulb's focus is on designing discreet modes, including a king of the hill game in which players design vehicles to take the hill and hold it. But while their opponents can redesign their vehicles to better oppose it, the current king cannot, introducing a push-pull competitiveness built on player ingenuity.

"We really love the genre, but normally the games in it are quite complex and you can get overwhelmed with possibilities," says Thorsted. "All of a sudden you feel you have nothing to do because there's everything! Instead, we want a building system that's as simple as building with Lego and a world that clearly describes for the player what they should do and what obstacles there are. We would like a game that has all the things we love from these complex construction games, but we also want to bring it out to an audience that's bigger than the normal construction-game audience."

Flashbulb is currently looking to Steam for that audience, at least to start with, where *Trailmakers* will release in Early Access later this year. One of the group's frustrations as a firstparty Microsoft studio was that they had no fully feasible platform for the games they wanted to make. "One of the great things about being free to choose the platform is that we can just go where the audience for this kind of game is," Dittmer says.

But they were content to leave it behind. In many ways, *Trailmakers* – which was in fact one of the crowd-rejected concepts – is closer to the team's established style: less dog-eat-dog, more creative.

But freedom from Microsoft also means not being able to take advantage of the firstparty spotlight Press Play enjoyed at E3 and across Xbox's marketing. Having lived through the golden age of Flash, the rise of the indie scene and growth of digital console storefronts, as a fully independent studio almost entirely financed by Thorsted, Dittmer and Teglbjærg themselves, now they're facing the challenge of being yet another game among a projected 5,000 that will release on Steam this year.

"WE SAY A LOT ABOUT WORK-LIFE BALANCE, AND THAT'S ACTUALLY NOT BULLSHIT AT ALL. IT'S SUPER IMPORTANT"

Project Knoxville was where they began to feel the strain between their ambitions and their bound audience, despite it having originated in an attempt to bring Xbox players into the development process. *Knoxville* was a thirdperson multiplayer survival game with social elements. Its arena-style 15-minute matches would see eight players attempting to escape an arena filled with dangerous enemies. The hook, though, was that they could try to team up or compete with each other to win the match, bringing the complex would-they-wouldn't-they questions of game theory into dynamic online play. *Knoxville* was just coming out of a difficult period in its development when Press Play closed. The team had ported it from Unity, which it had used since the original *Max & The Magic Marker*, to Unreal, and they'd established a solid path for its future.

How does a small studio today with big ambitions create the public awareness it needs? For Flashbulb, it's about starting small and growing *Trailmakers* steadily among hardcore players, and then building out, using what the team has learned in the 11 years they've been making games, focusing on quality and then releasing it everywhere, from consoles to mobile. The road ahead is uncertain, but then again, for this team, it always has been. As such, Flashbulb is the same studio that Press Play always was, with one key distinction. "It's more mature. Ten years more professional," says Thorsted. "We say a lot about work-life balance, and that's actually not bullshit at all. It's super important to us to have a place where people are happy and like each other and work great together. The best product comes out of happy developers." ■



1 Press Play initially released puzzle-platformer *Kalimba* on Xbox One and PC. **2** Max from *Curse Of Brotherhood* (Press Play, 2013) popped into 3D. **3** Max's original outing was in 2D on Wii in 2010, but he's since appeared on many other platforms. **4** Player characters from Flashbulb's *Trailmakers*. **5** The potential complexity of vehicles you can design in *Trailmakers* depends on the components you've found

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

No Man's Sky PS4
With our base now inexplicably languishing underwater following the significant Atlas Rises update, we start over. A refreshed tutorial teaches us to build signal boosters and to call our ship. It feels like cheating: no more punishment for straying too far from our lifeline in an underpowered space suit. Ancient portals can now be used to meet up with others – but given the initial 'lone explorer' vision, it feels a little disingenuous.

Overwatch PS4
God forbid the DPS mains are denied their quadruple kill button-press by a sneaky resurrecting medic with a button-press of her own. Mercy's 'huge rez' is no more, in its place a new Ultimate, with the offending power demoted to a single-target use and placed on a long cooldown as a regular ability. Joke's on them, though: the healer is bags more fun now, because we can fly, and nobody ever thinks to look up.

Arms Switch
We've fallen hard for new fighter Lola Pop, a puckish clown with candy arms who can deploy a shield to reflect an opponent's attacks back at them, or stamp an image of host Biff across their display. But a far better reason to return to Nintendo's distinctive brawler is the ability to reconfigure its unconventional input choices. No longer having to twist our ageing wrists to block is motivation enough to give those motion controls another shot.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

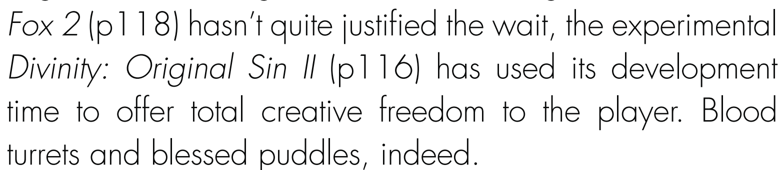


Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Play content

Creative assembly

Give a man a fish, and he'll eat for a week. Teach a man to turn into a Cheep Cheep, and he'll find enough entertainment for a lifetime. When it comes to videogames, an exciting set of tools can completely transform an experience – whether it's the clever framework propping up an otherwise lacklustre package, or the magical concept that immortalises a title in the annals of **Edge** history.

Thank goodness for the minds behind *Marvel Vs Capcom: Infinite* (p110), who have saved a muddled mish-mash of universes from total scorn with a smart set of systems that can produce fighting-game fireworks, given the chance. It's the same focus on the fundamentals – and how a player might use them to make something unique – that has elevated content-light brawler *Absolver* (p106) to elegant, innovative heights. And although the forward-thinking structure of *Star Fox 2* (p118) hasn't quite justified the wait, the experimental *Divinity: Original Sin II* (p116) has used its development time to offer total creative freedom to the player. Blood turrets and blessed puddles, indeed.





We're a little sad, then, that the solidly put together and undeniably charismatic *Destiny 2* (p102) has lost a little of the MMO shooter's propensity for imaginative play. The reduction in impenetrable RPG elements makes for a game much more welcoming to newcomers, but the dedicated, more improvisational space magician may find they've had their fill sooner than expected. Some games, however, are built to last: rare combinations of mechanical flexibility, ingenuity and charm that reward not just our greedy lizard brains, but our sense of wonder, too. *Super Mario Odyssey* is one such creation. Turn the page and, for the first time anywhere in the world, you can find out why.

Super Mario Odyssey

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD)
Format Switch
Release October 27

Wait a minute. Mario's a dinosaur? The payoff to *Odyssey*'s debut trailer stuck a moustache on a Tyrannosaurus as seemingly the logical extreme of its new capture mechanic. Courtesy of a ghostly hat named Cappy, Mario can indeed inhabit his enemies – well, if you can't beat them, you might as well become them – so you'd imagine this moment as the culmination of the game's fanciful conceit, a climactic blowout toward the game's end. But no. The T Rex arrives within the first half-hour, curled up and slumbering sweetly on the lush grass of the Cascade Kingdom – and yes, you get to control it. It seems a reckless gambit, before you realise it can only mean Nintendo knows it has better tricks under its hat. And goodness, does it ever.

Its big idea is certainly a daring one. A Mario game based on its star being sporadically hooked from the spotlight? It's also, come to think of it, a Mario game built around a single power-up. Cappy, however, represents the series' most versatile ability to date. The first transformation is introduced by a cutscene that makes the capture process look positively nightmarish – for our hero, at least, as he plummets, wailing, into a whirling vortex. Then comes the punchline, as for a moment we see the world through his eyes and hear a tentative, cod-Italian 'ribbit'. Cut to a frog sporting a moustache and that familiar red cap.

It's a great gag, and yet Nintendo approaches the business of playing as a frog – and, indeed, as any of the 50-odd other capture possibilities – with total seriousness. This isn't simply the amusing, throwaway inhabitation of, say, David OReilly's *Everything*, where all objects are functionally similar, and everything either slides along or rotates in rudimentary steps. Instead, it pays close attention to the physics and handling of each of these new forms, making each one enjoyable to command. There are usually clear benefits to specific transformations, of course. Lava bubbles are your only way to cross the broiling seas of the Luncheon Kingdom. Tap B as the frog, meanwhile, and it bounces to a height Mario could only dream of reaching with a triple-jump. A Goomba's grippy soles let it waddle across icy surfaces where Mario would skid about. Cheep Cheeps swim briskly through water – but flop around awkwardly when you take them ashore.

They're not always essential, and in many cases Mario's repertoire is enough to get by, though it's often easier or quicker to make the switch. Sometimes, you'll bench Mario for the simple novelty of playing as something else, while other forms offer distinct pleasures of their own. Tropical Wigglers are a tactile delight, as their stretchy bodies expand and contract with an accordion's wheeze. The T Rex has a fittingly clumsy, lumbering gait that might make you think twice about capturing it again, but then Nintendo spawns a crowd of spiky enemies that are just begging to be flattened. And one late-game opponent almost steals the show, with a unique ability that promises to make it a speedrunner's favourite.

With such a broad assortment of fresh guises, you might think Mario would be undermined. Not so



With such a broad assortment of fresh guises, you might think Mario would be undermined. Not so. Even leaving Cappy out of the equation, our hero has been furnished with his most expansive moveset to date. The triple jump is back, together with old favourites like the side somersault and backflip. Jump immediately after a ground pound and you'll gain extra height; tuck into a roll and you can drum with the Joy-Cons to move faster, sending sparks flying as you bounce along. Then again, sprinting downhill might be even more fun than rolling: as you accelerate down the beautiful brick-red dunes of the Sand Kingdom, you'll see Mario's legs going 19 to the dozen, his arms spread wide in delight, a picture of gleeful momentum. Introduce Cappy, and you've got more options still: hold the throw button and he'll spin in place, letting Mario run up and bounce off him, and that's just for starters. At the top of a New Donk skyscraper, we spy a rooftop we haven't yet visited and take a chance that we might just reach it. We roll into a long jump off the edge, throwing Cappy ahead of us, before launching into a dive that bounces Mario off his hatted friend, diving again to clear the outer ledge by a matter of inches. There's an easier route there, sure. A more exhilarating one? Unlikely.

It's tempting to say Mario's never felt better under the thumbs; he's certainly never felt better in the palms. Haring up power cables as an electrical spark produces a tingly buzz of feedback, while you can sense a gentle mechanical click as you twist the camera while overlooking a stage inside a pair of floating binoculars. And diving into the carbonated ocean of the Seaside Kingdom produces such a convincing sensation of effervescence you'll be unable to resist climbing back out just so you can take another dip and feel the fizz once more. Such is the advantage of playing with Joy-Cons in separate hands, that portable mode is a compromise – and it's not the only reason why the TV feels like *Odyssey*'s natural home. Nintendo's Koichi Hayashida once dismissed the notion of a 3DS port of *Galaxy*, saying Mario would be little more than a speck on the screen; though we're on more capable hardware, there are times in handheld mode when subtle details are lost, or distant targets become hard to make out without pressing your nose against the display.

Odyssey's combination of fantastical elements and realistic detail – its pipes convincingly scuffed, its brickwork authentically weathered – takes some getting used to. But these worlds are so generously stuffed with distractions that after a while you'll barely notice the incongruities. Moons, the game's main collectable, are ▶

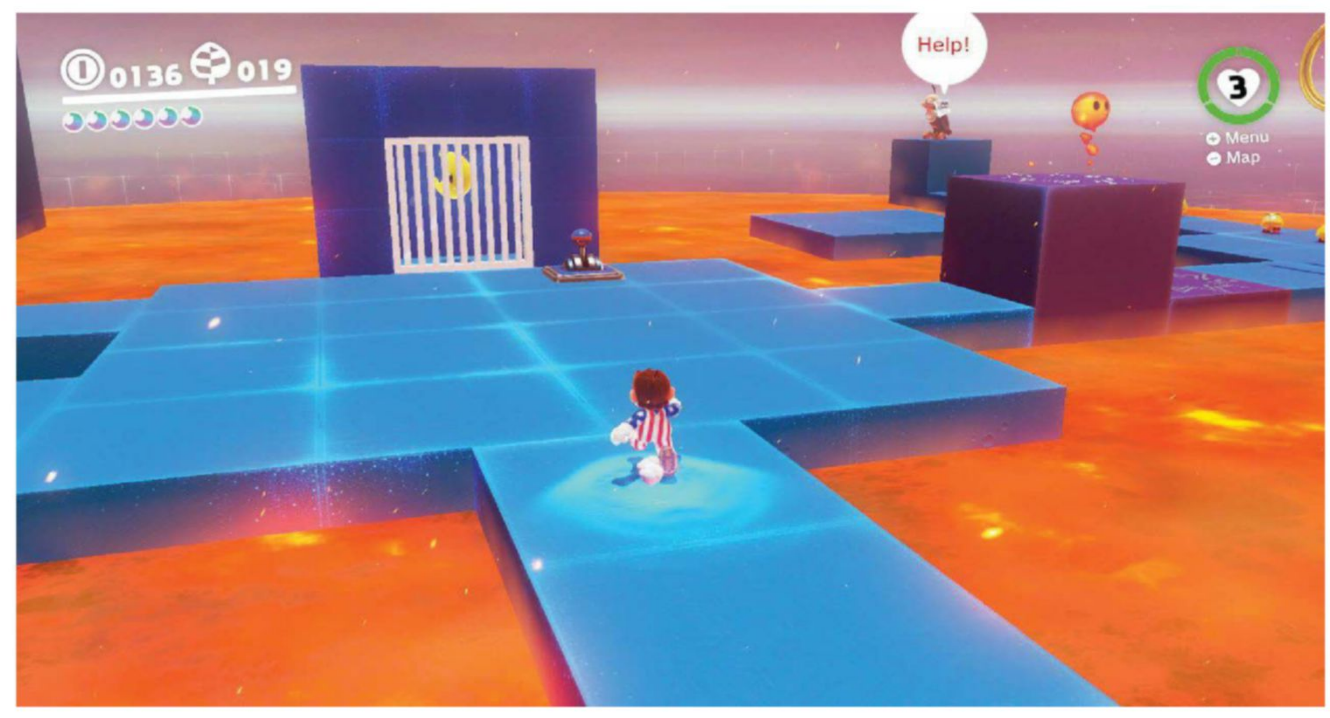


LEFT **Cappy's multifunctionality means Mario doesn't have to don a new outfit for each power-up, so he can gad about wearing whatever.** BELOW **Once you've bought a kingdom's unique outfits, you can spend any spare purple coins on stickers and souvenirs, which become delightful visible reminders of Mario's travels.** MAIN **Losing Cappy has a similar effect to being rid of Fludd in *Sunshine*. Some will feel anxious at being robbed of his abilities; others will relish relying on Mario alone**



ABOVE With just a handful of exceptions, the game's side-scrolling sections are pretty easy: a not-entirely-unpleasant side effect of Mario's inertia having changed quite a bit over the years

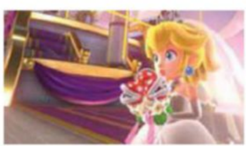




scattered liberally across them. Some are visible but beyond easy reach; others are quickly unearthed from glowing hiding places; the majority take rather more effort to earn. A clutch of stage-specific quests offer a more traditional structured progression, but otherwise you're free to choose between the many remaining activities to earn the right to move on.

Not all activities are created equal, but you're rarely far from a brilliant new idea, or a clever twist on an old one – and Cappy sits at the heart of most of them, allowing Nintendo to reinvent a host of favourites. Capture a Goomba and you can leap onto others to form a tower, stacking up to reach floating Moons, or even to impress potential mates. Hammer Bros join in the culinary theme of the Luncheon Kingdom, lobbing frying pans to chip away at rock walls. Chain Chomps become wrecking balls in one stage and billiard balls in another, as you line up a cannon shot to complete one of hundreds of shortform challenges. And the capture mechanics are the driving force behind *Mario*'s finest-ever selection of boss fights, with Oddjob-esque hat attacks supplemented by mid-fight transformations.

If the opening, as a propeller on Bowser's airship shreds Mario's cap, suggests Nintendo is comfortable slaying a few sacred cows, this odyssey isn't about to forget where Mario came from. It often feels like a celebration of his history, in fact. Its nostalgic leanings are most apparent in the frequent retro-styled 2D sections: enter a pipe and Mario might emerge in 8bit form against a wall, or even embedded in the sea floor, with water gently lapping across the screen as Cheep Cheeps wiggle by. Some of these sequences employ dazzling spatial tricks; others simply benefit from spectacular presentation – a nighttime festival



PEACH NOBBLER

Odyssey's story begins in predictable fashion, as the princess is again kidnapped by Bowser, this time so the two can be married. It's a disappointingly conventional setup, though even here there are a few twists. For starters, this is easily the most competent Bowser has ever been. First, he deploys the Broodals, a quartet of rabbit wedding planners, to hold Mario up, before thwarting him again during a mid-game encounter. Then he ups the ante still further, resulting in a battle quite unlike anything we've seen in a Mario game before. Peach, for her part, is no helpless damsel, either. Her role expands in the postgame, though not in the way you might expect, while a single late-game reaction shot is likely to go down in history for its potential ramifications for the series' lore.

***Odyssey* is surprisingly violent in places, though its moments of brutal slapstick are played strictly for laughs. One boss fight seems to be based on the familiar playground taunt of 'Stop hitting yourself'**

commemorating the Metro Kingdom's origins functions both as a dewy-eyed tribute to Mario's early days and a reminder of just how far he's come since. And the party continues in the postgame, too. *Odyssey* already feels like the spiritual successor to *Mario 64* we never quite got, before a thrilling final throwback – hinted at in a skin-prickling tease some way before the climax – makes the connection more explicit.

While that game's pioneering work partly informed the development of the N64's other era-defining classic, here the *Zelda* team returns the favour. There is, as we've already noted, a lot of *Breath Of The Wild* in *Super Mario Odyssey*, from the chance to scout out potential destinations from high above ground, to the way the soundtrack often lets you acclimatise to your surroundings in relative quiet before the stage's main theme announces itself. But it's most obvious in the way its environments appeal to your natural curiosity, sights and sounds teasing you away from your present path – and in its sheer volume of diversions. Though its worlds are more compact, it really does earn that Homerian title: Link may have more Korok seeds to find than Mario has Moons, but not by many.

And these two games, beyond their shared role in getting Switch off to a flying start, have something else in common. Like *BOTW*, *Odyssey* is a new entry in a long-running series that belies its age with sprightly invention, taking big risks with an established formula, and having all of them pay off handsomely. Mario might be getting on a bit, then, but a dinosaur? This astonishing adventure proves he's anything but. **10**

Post Script

Why Odyssey is the reinvention of the sandbox platformer we've been waiting for since 2002

Poor *Sunshine*. Given one of the hardest acts to follow in the medium's history, the series' GameCube outing fluffed its lines a bit, becoming the proverbial black sheep of 3D Marios. It's all relative, of course: *Sunshine* remains superior to the vast majority of its peers, and the few games ahead of it all have 'Mario' in the title. And, in light of its obvious failings, its considerable achievements were all but overlooked. A straight sequel to *Mario 64* would no doubt have been warmly welcomed, but Nintendo, as ever, resisted the easy option. Like *Odyssey*, *Sunshine* was a bold attempt to challenge established conventions, a shot at taking the series in a new direction, after establishing (and defining) the parameters of the sandbox platformer six years earlier. It didn't quite land, but you could argue that Nintendo learned the wrong lessons from *Sunshine*'s comparatively lukewarm reception.

That isn't to say *Galaxy* was a mistake; heavens above, far from it. But for all its giddy ambition, Mario's voyage beyond the stars represented a calculated retreat from the freedom of *Sunshine*'s expansive environments. Even its larger landmasses offered little room to properly stretch your legs, with most stars requiring you to follow a linear path, even if that path did send you twirling balletically through the infinite blackness of space. A handful of objectives lay off the beaten track, sure, but warp stars that carried you directly to distant planetoids meant you weren't really finding your own way there so much as being given an aggressive, if beautiful, shove in the right direction.

Odyssey, on the other hand, feels like a true reinvention of the sandbox platformer, building upon *Mario 64*'s sturdy foundations and adding its own creative curlicues. Indeed, there are several overt nods to its forerunner, including the paintings that warp you from one world to another. But even these function a little differently, acting more as sneak peeks of what's to come. Elsewhere, it throws out entrenched ideas, frequently for the better. It does away with a lives system that has come to feel archaic. Fall, and Nintendo hits you where it hurts: your wallet. Losing 10 coins might seem like pocket change, but when you've had your heart set on spending 1,000 of them just so you can have poor Mario exploring the Snow Kingdom in his boxers – or you've been saving up for the dozens of special outfits that shops begin to stock once you've earned enough Moons – it's punishment enough.

The game's other currencies matter more, too. No longer do you hunt down purple coins for the sake of a single collectable, but for a more tangible reward. Some of the region-specific outfits you can buy with these coins offer you access to new areas; others are required to perk up NPCs, such as a glum businessman who inexplicably wants to see Mario in his faintly terrifying clown garb. Yes, essentially it's another hoop to jump through for jumping's sake, but there's something joyful about playing dress-up with a character that rarely gets to remove his dungarees – and, of course, seeing these costumes rendered in pixellated form during *Odyssey*'s 8bit interludes. And, on occasion, there's a comedic pay-off: we heartily recommend wearing a thick winter coat in a sun-baked coastal setting, for instance.

Odyssey builds upon Mario 64's sturdy foundations and adds its own creative curlicues

By giving you a broader number of ways to collect Moons, it's a game that's more considerate of every type of player. Competitive types can earn them through races and other sporting challenges, many of which have their own leaderboards. Those looking for a sterner test, meanwhile, can descend pipes and wells to abstract environments that host more traditional tests of Mario's athleticism. Those who simply want to see all the sights without touching the more taxing objectives can buy their way to progress, spending coins on Moons at each kingdom's shop. Explorers can ignore the tips from Toads and parrots to find collectables, while for those who prefer a bit of guidance, an optional Assist mode turns on arrows that lead you to your next objective.



There's also a stronger narrative drive. Every Kingdom takes you on a journey with an admittedly tenuous link to the wider story before it's fully opened up, and many are transformed by your actions. Raising the temperature of the Sand Kingdom requires you to first reach the inverted pyramid at its heart, and then to descend into the hole it was plugging once it's floated upward. Your introduction to the Metro Kingdom, meanwhile, takes place on a rain-lashed night, the city teeming with stinging bugs as you face a fusillade of tank fire, before it's ready to offer you a friendlier New Donk welcome. Crucially, you're no longer kicked out after completing a main quest, either. There's a brief fanfare as you collect a Moon, but afterwards you're free to explore at your own pace. Later, you're offered the opportunity to revisit the game's boss fights separately, letting you enjoy some of *Odyssey*'s standout moments without diminishing the sense of achievement in making these worlds a more pleasant place to be. And even before you've rescued Peach, you'll notice tourists from other kingdoms popping up in new places.

In fact, as *Odyssey*'s various NPCs kick back and enjoy their vacations, you might well be reminded of *Sunshine*'s holiday flavour – and in other ways it's clear Nintendo hasn't forgotten Mario's most divisive outing. As you scud across the surface of the Seaside Kingdom's fizzy waters, you'll realise Nintendo has even found a way to pay homage to poor forgotten Fludd. When a game can make you feel nostalgic for that irksome little blighter, it's clearly doing something right. ■

Destiny 2

Developer Bungie
Publisher Activision
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now (PS4, Xbox One), October 24 (PC)

We think a lot about what happened when you reached level 20 in *Destiny*. A single popup screen told you that, hey, you know that game you've been playing? Well, you're playing another one now. Go and gather Light, it said, to increase your power. And that was pretty much it. That screen is a summary of all that was wrong with *Destiny* in 2014: it was two games in one, the first a deeply disappointing, miserably plotted campaign, the second an intoxicating, yet bafflingly underexplained loot grind. Bridging the gap between them was that single screen. An endgame needs an on-ramp. *Destiny* had a huge, sheer wall.

Destiny 2 is, like its predecessor, two games in one. Yet its story campaign is a significant step forward. It's actually coherent, for a start, telling a tale that is easy to follow, the motivations of its cast members, and the stakes for humanity at large, made clear from the outset. It is not without its disappointments – vehicle sections, while nice surprises and fine pace breakers, drag out a little too long and turn *Destiny*, a game about killing alien monsters with mad guns and brilliant space magic, into very slow driving games in which things also die. And it's a little easier than it was during our trip to Bungie for the cover of **E**310, particularly in a three-player fireteam. But it is, at least, *good*, and in the context of its predecessor, that will do nicely.

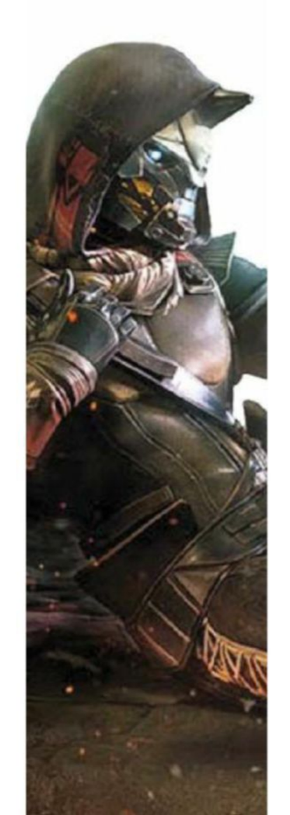
Yet *Destiny 2*'s early magic lies in the structure beneath that campaign. Throughout the eight or so hours it'll take you to run through the story, Bungie is quietly training you up for the endgame, introducing you to powerful gear and the methods through which you can acquire it. Two exotic items are given out for free as you go, showing you the kinds of rewards that are on offer if you stick with the game after the credits. Once you finish the campaign, you return to the social hub and follow quest markers to visit each of your victorious allies one by one. At the end of the line is Zavala, the Vanguard's leading Titan. If you're not already at level 20, the point at which *Destiny 2*'s gear game begins in earnest, he'll boost you to it. Then he gives you a high-level exotic engram, a reward for campaign completion that knocks any cutscene into a cocked hat.

Immediately, you realise what you need to do next in order to increase your Power, the replacement for the first game's rather obtuse Light stat. And you know because you've already done a lot of it throughout the campaign. Planetside activities may not immediately yield legendary or exotic gear – though many have a chance to – but each will at least net you reputation tokens which can be redeemed at a local vendor for powerful new toys. Extra quests appear on each planet which lead directly to exotic weaponry. And if you're ever unsure about just where to head next, the new Milestone system will show you, in plain terms, which tasks you should focus on to reap the best rewards. Where *Destiny* put up its wall when you reached level 20 and simply walked away, here you're silently told what to do in the early hours, then led by the hand into the endgame. It is masterfully handled.

After that comes the familiar *Destiny* routine: shooting things, in order to get new things, that make shooting things easier and more fun. You'll hop down to a planet, call up the Director menu (previously a planetary map from which you picked missions, it now shows missions and events in your current location) and see what's around, ticking off activities, hoovering up loot drops and tokens. It flows nicely, progress is steady, and rewards are immediate: unlike in *Destiny*, gear doesn't need to be levelled before it can be used. Get something new, and you can try it out straight away.

Yet throughout the midgame, there's a niggling feeling. This is *Destiny*, after all. It is a credit to Bungie that it takes dozens of hours of play, and entry deep into the endgame, before things even hint at beginning to fall apart. And when they do, it is by no means ruinous, but merely disappointing in the context of what has come before.

> It takes dozens of hours, and entry deep into the endgame, before things even hint at beginning to fall apart



Flashpoints are a new addition to the *Destiny* template. You're sent to a certain planet to complete a number of Public Events, which are complicated by souped-up monsters turning up. Cayde-6, the affable Hunter voiced by Nathan Fillion, also sells a set of maps each week, hidden about a given world and offering a randomised shot at unique weapons and armour. You'll get powerful gear for clearing the weekly Nightfall Strike. Similar rewards are on offer for emerging victorious from Trials Of The Nine, a high-level PvP tournament that runs each weekend, or the Leviathan raid.

Yet for all that there are now more ways to inch up your Power stat each week, much more is left behind. Many of the activities that make each place feel busy and complete are rendered obsolete, since they don't yield useful rewards. A map that once teemed with life, and which was still busy once the credits had rolled on the campaign, begins to feel oddly empty, despite the icons that remain on it. Those who don't feel quite ready to push on to the real endgame will be stuck like this for a while, surrounded by things to do which, while enjoyable, aren't especially helpful.

The ultimate goal is Leviathan, *Destiny*'s first raid. While it's easy on the eye – a colossal, opulently gilded spaceship hanging high in near-Nessus orbit – it's a conceptual mess, barely part of the world or story, part health spa, part deadly gameshow, part interdimensional rift. While Bungie's attempt to play with the structure of a *Destiny* raid pays off – each encounter spokes off from a central hub, the order of battles changes every week, and there's a sprawling maze running through the ▶

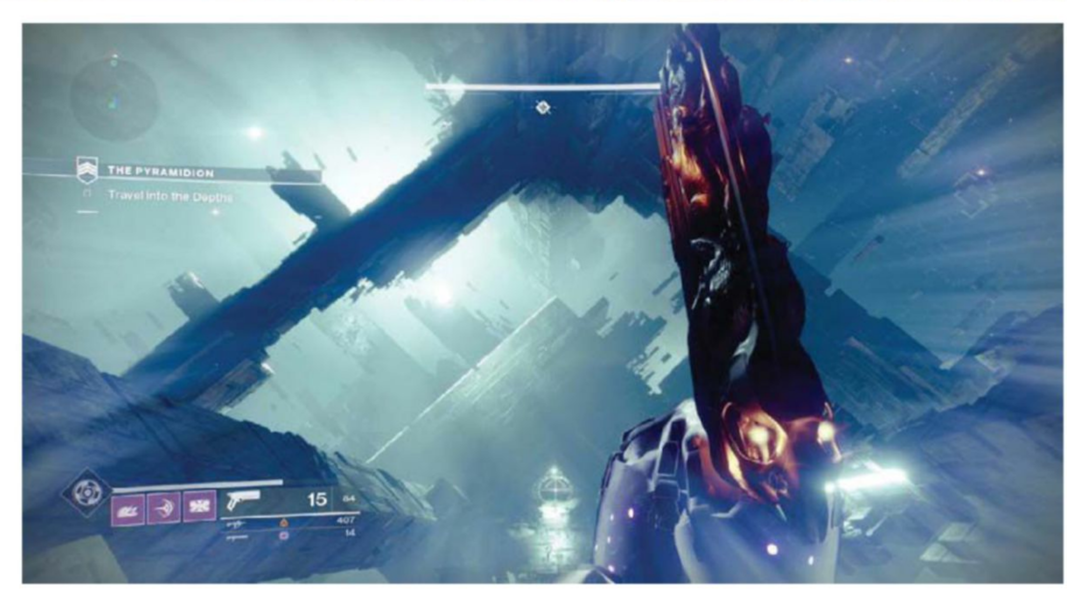




ABOVE The Leviathan isn't completely untethered to the *Destiny 2* story; it's referenced in an Adventure mission on Io which many players will miss. It's nonsense, really, but it's hard not to marvel at the scale of the thing



TOP The campaign's final act has you board the Almighty, Ghaul's planet-destroying ship. It's a first for *Destiny*, setting missions in areas that aren't accessible during normal play in the open world. **MAIN** While the new planets and moons may recall zones we visited in the first *Destiny* – Nessus and Io both feel a little like Venus – they're given their own identity by Bungie's signature skyboxes. **RIGHT** The Pyramidion Strike is a dizzying sortie through a beautiful Vex construction that introduces new platforming mechanics to the *Destiny* formula. It's a shame Strikes are so light on rewards



bowels of the ship containing shortcuts and locked chests — it's a little too familiar, reusing mechanics from previous *Destiny* raids. And there's an homage to the painful early days of the first game: it's entirely possible to emerge from the Leviathan with just a single loot drop, since only the boss is guaranteed to give you anything. You'll receive plenty of tokens, but the vendor only appears once you finish the whole raid. Until you beat the final boss, *Destiny*'s hardest encounter feels like its least rewarding, and as the supposed high point of such a generous game, that feels a little off.

It's a problem, too, in an endgame that quickly becomes almost entirely about the pursuit of bigger numbers, rather than better toys. There was certainly frustration in the randomisation of *Destiny*'s loot: drops would come with a set of perks selected at random from a large pool, leading to disappointment when you got a good gun with bad properties. *Destiny 2*, however, goes too far the other way. While the drop itself will be random, everything now has a fixed set of perks; the version of the gun or armour piece you just got is as good as it can possibly be. Great early on, certainly, but in the long term it just means getting more duplicates, and having less to hunt for. Combined with the removal of meaningful perks from armour — that side of your inventory is now about aesthetics, rather than playstyle — it means that we are scrapping more gear the moment it drops than we ever did in the first game.

One big advantage of this streamlining is that it makes balance in the competitive Crucible an easier task; Bungie can now look at guns individually, without needing to make sweeping changes to how individual perks work or, worse, to entire classes of weapon. And, despite some early wrinkles, it appears to have worked.



NEEDS OF THE MANY

Clans were sorely undercooked in *Destiny*, and Bungie has certainly remedied that in the sequel. A new system tracks your activities and earns XP for your clan, which levels up and acquires new passive rewards – boosting currency earnings, for instance – for the entire crew. Best of all is a series of clan-wide rewards when members complete high-level content; if one team goes flawless in Trials Of The Nine, clears the Nightfall, or conquers the raid, everyone gets a Power-boosting reward. Great stuff in theory, but it does mean that people who never set foot on the Leviathan may have got more out of it than our launch-week crew managed; after five evenings, we left with tails between legs, and the final boss still standing.

While it's built on the same engine, this is a much prettier game than its predecessor. A new area, unlocked after you finish the campaign, is ideal Share-button material, though there is beauty to be found throughout

Yet for those who like their *Destiny* to feel imbalanced — to be a celebration of absurd guns and abilities, rather than just another competitive shooter — Crucible has lost a little of its magic. The switch from six-player teams to four-a-side has benefits, sure; the pace is a little slower now, and the action easier to read. But that, combined with the toning down of abilities (grenades and melees are no longer one-hit-kills; supers are easier to counter) mean that the most effective strategy is to bunch up and roam the map together, winning encounters against smaller groups using brute numerical force. Teamwork should be important, certainly. But for too much of *Destiny 2*'s PvP component, it feels like your only option.

There's nothing here that can't be fixed, of course — and the *Destiny* journey to date has shown that, while it might take Bungie a while, it will get there eventually. As such, it's probably best to take your time with *Destiny 2*. Those of us who merrily tear through 100 hours of videogame inside a fortnight will always come up short eventually; no developer on the planet can keep up with that pace. For the more casual — OK, more sane — player, however, *Destiny 2* is almost a triumph. It is a game much better at explaining itself, that wants to be enjoyed and understood, and is happy to reward players for simply being there. If Bungie's main goal was to have this most intoxicating of games appeal to more people then, well, milestone complete. Those that were already on the hook, however, may find that, while the journey is better than ever, the destination leaves a little to be desired.

8

Post Script

Luke Smith, game director, Destiny 2

With development of the launch game complete, director Luke Smith has, like us, been playing a lot of *Destiny 2*. Two weeks after launch, here he discusses the game's early life, Bungie's renewed focus on data, and the never-ending struggle to keep pace with an audience with an insatiable hunger for new things to do.



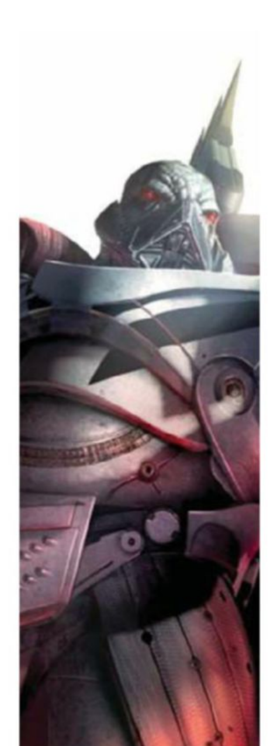
No doubt you've been keeping tabs on what players are up to in the game. Is their activity running largely as you expected?
There have been some pleasant surprises, but there are some that ask you to be introspective about them, too. An extremely high percentage of players have both finished the campaign and reached the level cap. Like, a shocking number of players. I think that's a really interesting data point, and the team should be really proud of that. It means that, when people enter the world, they're sticking around. But the flip of it is, are we bringing enough new people in? With every piece of positive data, there's other stuff we should be exploring, and I think that's a good lesson. Data tells a story, and we've got to make sure we're watching that.

After ten days or so, we could see the tide turning a bit among the *Destiny* community. Players who'd binged on the game were worrying about the longevity and shape of the endgame, fretting they'd run out of things to do. What's your response?
It is impossible for us to make content faster than players can consume it. It takes months to make an awesome Adventure, and players will eat it in 20 minutes like a big bag of chips (laughs). This is just part of the job; we've got to get more content in the pipeline.

The fact it's taken two weeks for that to happen actually says a lot, right? If you run out of things to do, but you've played 100 hours, that's not so bad.
I think that sounds pretty good! I don't play a lot of games for 80 or 90 hours. I think one of the things we've got to make sure we're doing right is, if you play it for 80 or 90 hours, are you happy with where you got your character to? And when there's new stuff for you to do, are you interested in coming back?

The *Destiny* expansions contained some great little secrets, such as Outbreak Prime and Black Spindle. The people on Reddit who reckon they've seen everything the game has to offer... are they right?
I don't want to set expectations that we've got a hidden Outbreak Prime or Black Spindle lying in the wings! But we do think of things like Faction Rally, and Iron Banner, and there's stuff that can come out of the Cayde chests every week. There's stuff that's going to keep showing up that people haven't found yet.

It takes months to make an awesome Adventure, and players will eat it in 20 minutes like a big bag of chips



One of the advantages of some of the changes you've made, such as removing random perks, mean you can tinker with individual guns, rather than perks or entire classes. How does that affect your approach to balance in the Crucible?
It gives us a much better look on the data side. When we get data back we can now look at something like scout rifles and see what is and isn't being used. Before, if something like Clever Dragon was over-represented in Trials Of Osiris, you wouldn't really know what that meant. Now if we see something like Bad News [a *Destiny 2* hand cannon] being highly represented in Crucible, we can look and see why, see what's making it potent, and potentially tinker with it from there.

Removing perks was meant to reduce the way *Destiny* loot drops could be disappointing – you didn't get the god roll, so you dismantled it immediately. Yet with fixed weapon perks we're dismantling more guns than ever. What's the answer to that, and do you still believe it was the right decision?
I'm still a pretty big supporter of the change. I believe that, ultimately, the *Destiny* franchise is heading towards being a collection game. I understand that we have shortcomings there right now that we need to address. With respect to making duplicates matter, this is still one of the things we have ideas for. You project, when something comes out, what you think the problems are going to be. Sometimes you're right, and you're like, cool, we can just do the work we planned to do. Sometimes you're not right, or you have something else come up that becomes a higher priority. So for us, what we're doing right now is looking at the potential work we could do, and we'll prioritise it. I still believe, and so does the gameplay team, that we've done the right thing for the collection game.

You told us earlier this year that *Destiny 2*'s campaign was foreshadowing story events that might not come to light for years. Was that just about the post-credits scene, or is there more in there?
I talk about feature development on a short, medium and long-term timeframe, and I think the post-credits sequence does a lot of the same. The long-term stuff is years away, while the short term stuff is months away. The first thing the Traveler's light touches when it leaves in that cinematic is Mercury, a place we've visited before, and [will again] in our first expansion, Curse Of Osiris. We're definitely calling the shot, but we're calling it across a variety of timeframes. ■

Absolver

At first, helping hands seem few and far between. A brief tutorial brushes over the basics of fighting: one button for a quick blow, a second for a guard-breaking attack, and other commands producing a block, a feint and an evasive dash. There's a chance to practise your Prospect's special class ability – a parry, perhaps, or a multi-directional dodge – a scuffle with a gatekeeper, and then you're free to roam the ruined kingdom of Adal. Unfortunately, so is everyone else. Jogging about in starter gear is an open invitation to groups of high-level thugs who might like to batter you silly for sweet XP. There is little defence against it. Thankfully, such attacks are infrequent – and are even sometimes followed by an outstretched palm, as an offending player pulls your fighter to their feet.

Fighting is defined by your combat 'deck', a set of four customisable chains of moves that you can switch between for unpredictable flurries of blows. Pressing buttons in practised rhythms and dodging, one eye on your stamina bar, will get you halfway, but the key to advanced play lies in the Meditation menu. Entering it allows you to spend earned attribute points, edit your deck and test out the changes in Practice mode. Each move leaves you in a particular stance, meaning you can alter things so you flow automatically into another series of moves, circumventing manual stance-changing. Adding 'alternative' moves to the second button is the next step when opponents begin to predict your flow: throwing out a low sweep instead of the expected jab, for instance, can make all the difference.

It's a visual toolkit breaking down what seasoned fighting-game players have been doing in their heads for decades: *Absolver*'s brawls just require advance preparation. The problem is that the system is never quite explained. Introductory fights are unintuitive: experimental presses of the same button yielding different results every time, an uninspected deck throwing you into a palm strike or guard-breaking kick seemingly at random. All you can do is put up your guard and block, and wait, and try to learn. But this patience is a mechanic. Successfully defending against certain blows raises a meter: win the fight, and you keep XP for that move. Fill the meter entirely over time, and you'll add it to your repertoire. Waiting for an opponent to use up stamina on your block can become a grind, as you drag out brawls with AI foes to farm moves. Nonetheless, discipline is tangibly rewarded, and the spoils encourage you to experiment further.

The four class abilities add further depth. Followers of Forsaken can parry attacks left and right. Khalt can absorb a blow and counterattack for a slight health boost, while the dextrous Windfall can avoid attacks from four directions. Polish off the campaign – six miniboss Marked Ones and three bosses, a couple of evenings' work – and you can learn Stagger, a drunken-

Developer Sloclap
Publisher Devolver Digital
Format PC, PS4 (tested)
Release Out now

> The result is a martial-arts game whose theme feeds positively into how people play it



SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS
Absolver's version of a clan or a guild is a School, a player-made group teaching a customised combat deck. Joining one gives new players easy access to a tried-and-tested moveset: the Encounters menu lists people you've met, the School they're part of and its popularity, and lets you enrol. Flitting between several is the optimal way to try all of the class combat styles. Moves stay unlocked for as long as you remain in that particular School: to keep certain attacks, you'll have to use them in combat and learn them the regular way. Reach Rank 50 in Combat Trials, and you can start your own School to share your combat deck globally in the hopes of viral success – although at the time of writing, top spot belongs to Rakkio, the NPC who teaches Stagger style.

boxing style of defensive manoeuvres with follow-up attacks attached. In truth, all are hard to truly master: human foes are so volatile that countering each isn't exactly rock-paper-scissors. The timing on parries and absorbs is unforgiving; the contextual knowledge needed to use Windfall's directional dodge consistently against *Absolver*'s hundreds of moves often feels futile. Technical issues don't help. At the time of writing, servers are struggling to support the weight of an already healthy community, framerates plummeting when new players enter the world zone you're currently in. If you're mid-fight then, well, good luck.

When things are working as intended, however, the battle system shines. All abilities are punishable when they fail, giving you acres of time to counterattack when baiting them out of NPCs or spam-happy players. Successfully using yours charges energy shards floating at your hip: use them to heal slightly, cast debuffs or pull out a breakable weapon with a new moveset for a slight damage advantage. As such, fights aren't always the precise, consistent clashes native to the genre, and some will find the uncertainty too much to bear. Yet every one-on-one exists on a knife edge between skill and luck, planning and instinct, clumsiness and elegance – with satisfying weight behind every blow.

Fighting groups is irritating: at least non-human opponents will take turns, although an unwieldy target-switching input isn't much help. But *Absolver*'s more intimate interactions are joyful mental dances, whether you're fighting or making friends. Finding weaknesses in a sparring partner's build is tough, but a unique challenge lies in silently communicating that a pal should use less haphazard moves so they don't hit you when you focus an enemy together. (Demonstrating the move, followed by the "No no no" emote, proves effective.) This wordless communication can delight: being led to a checkpoint by someone more savvy than we'd thought, or a friend sacrificing themselves for our gain by using a move sending both them and miniboss over a cliff. It says everything that the player who has just taken apart your carefully constructed deck in the post-campaign Combat Trials will resurrect you, according to the unspoken honour code developing – reaching down, hand outstretched, to help you up again.

The result is a martial-arts game whose theme feeds positively into how people play it, where fulfilment comes not just from winning, but also from the learning process. The purity and quality of *Absolver*'s vision has provided an innovative, constructive take on an often impenetrable genre. It's a challenging yet friendly space that embodies the old adage, 'fall down seven times, get up eight.' We've fallen down many more times than that in *Absolver* – but there's always someone on hand to help us up, their fists uncurling like flowers. **8**





ABOVE Fighting around environmental obstacles like trees can offer defensive benefits. Unlike more traditional fighting games, anything goes – including using a Shockwave power to push opponents off ledges





MAIN Thoughtful sound design is about more than just building atmosphere. Following tell-tale grunts from around corners leads you to new fights and new friends.
ABOVE The Imperial Quarters, the campaign's final area, is home to some uncharacteristically grand architecture for Adal.
LEFT Winning a fight grants you a chunk of health. The best way to deal with multiple NPCs is to focus one at a time: this approach proves very useful in one late boss fight

Post Script

Pierre Tarno, creative director, Sloclap

Absolver is Parisian studio Sloclap's debut game – and now Devolver Digital's most successful launch to date. Here, creative director **Pierre Tarno** discusses the pressure and promise behind an indie title's early popularity, and the curious process of discovering your own game during development.



***Absolver* is Devolver Digital's biggest-ever launch, and you had almost 20,000 concurrent players in the first few days. How has that been for you?**
We're really happy we've generated this kind of interest. For an independent game, it was nice to see that so many people cared. Thing is, it wasn't exactly reason to rejoice, because as a lot of players came in, we also saw issues and framerate problems that we hadn't had in our dev tests or in beta. We couldn't really relax and celebrate, party and drink. It was pretty much business as usual – even worse, because we hurried to fix the most urgent issues. The dev team, especially the programmers, have been working like crazy in the early hours of the morning, fixing as many issues as fast as possible. That went on until patch 1.05, which improved things quite a bit. We're going to try and avoid burning ourselves out, but still have a pretty intense rhythm of updates in the weeks and months to come.

Speaking of grind, there's a lot of it in *Absolver*. Why design a system that requires the player to repeatedly fight low-level NPCs?
When I talk about 'farming' moves, I don't think of it in a negative way. It's actually something I really enjoy. As I learn a move and start to understand how to react to it, my character is learning it too, and when my character has unlocked it, it's also a point where I, the player, know the ins and outs of that move. I find the process almost like a game of cat and mouse, where you're kind of toying with an NPC. You're trying to bring them down to very low health, then keep them there to understand their sequences, avoiding, absorbing or parrying the attack that you want to learn.

Was it your intention to create a game around the culture of respect in martial arts, in the hopes players would behave a certain way?
No, that's something that came up later. We had our original intentions – making a martial-arts game with both beauty and depth – but you kind of discover a game as you're making it. And as we developed further and iterated, and came to a better understanding of what our game really was, things actually coalesced. Once we understood the experience better, mechanics started to merge into it, such as the attack learning mechanic, and the mentoring system. We were hoping that this is the way that players would interpret the game for themselves, and how they would react and behave.

Obviously, you have some people getting ganked. But my experiences in the world have been mostly positive, and when I start a PvP match, I can't remember the last match I started where the guy didn't bow to me before we started fighting. Maybe the guy's going to Shockwave you off a ledge, but he's still going to bow first.

"If we had had one more year, we would have put more time into how you learn the combat deck"



There is very little explanation of how the combat deck works in the game. Was it a purposeful decision to force players to work it out for themselves?
If I'm totally honest, it's because we're an independent studio, and we have a certain timeline. If we had had six more months or one more year, we probably would have put more time into how you learn the combat deck. The way we made these final calls towards the end of the project was deciding that players who were interested in that system would take the time to really look at the interface and experiment.

That being said, it's a shame if you get some people who are interested, but are put off by the apparent complexity. We've got a large backlog of things already that we want to do, so it's always a matter of priority. But getting people on board with the combat-deck system and making it as accessible as possible is certainly something we'll be paying attention to.

It's a short game, and while we found the campaign a helpful introduction to PvP, others are disappointed in the lack of PvE. What's your response to that?
We never set out to make a narrative game. Our intention was to focus on the core gameplay: the combat system, and player encounters. The world is not there to offer 40 hours of exploration and story, it's there as a place where players will meet to create interesting situations. What's important to me is giving meaning and context to the universe and why you're here, rather telling an actual story. Again, we're an indie studio, and creating a big world takes a lot of time and money. Trying to spread it out in multiple directions would have been a recipe for failure. And for me, it's the player-generated stories that are interesting: experiences that I've had in *Journey* or in *Absolver* are some of the strongest and most emotional ones I've had in gaming, where stories emerge from the behaviour of players and from the gameplay systems.

And we'll keep on making it better, more accessible, and adding content. Pretty soon, there'll be a prestige system in which players can invest points to respec their characters, and we're also going to let you destroy items to get pigments that change the colour of other pieces of equipment. Fashion is king. ■

FLATOUT 4
TOTAL INSANITY







OUT NOW









Marvel Vs Capcom: Infinite

Perhaps you're interested in *Marvel Vs Capcom: Infinite*'s story mode. If that's the case, allow us to suggest you do something more useful with that money; donate it to a political party whose views you abhor, perhaps, or run it under the tap for ten minutes before throwing it in the bin. It is an embarrassment that wastes not only the bonkers potential of its set-up but also completely fails to fulfil the principal goal of the contemporary fighting-game story mode. What should be a graceful introduction to the game is instead a confusing mess that spends more time undermining its systems than it does exploring them.

Any hope that Capcom might have learned a few lessons from *Street Fighter V*'s long delayed, and eventually awful, cinematic story mode quickly fades as the studio sets about making the same mistakes from the off. Netherrealm's equivalent modes work because they put you in control of a single character for a few fights at a time; you know you'll be playing as a Johnny Cage or a Batman for a while, so you might as well dip into the command list and get a handle on their special moves, and maybe memorise a few combo strings while you're at it. Yet here, as in *SFV*, you get one fight with a given character, and then it's on to the next.

There's no point learning anything, especially given the way the game discourages you from trying to play it properly. Many fights have you facing off against multiple foes; you'll find a way through one of their defenses, get a few hits in, and then be struck in the back of the head by someone else. Elsewhere, Capcom might bestow the opposition with super armour, so that while you can hit them, they'll never flinch from the blow. This essentially removes the combo system from the game, since at any time your foe can simply decide to start attacking you. Oh, and there might also be an NPC in the background chucking homing missiles at you. What should be an enjoyable introduction to a game where 100-hit combos are commonplace is instead a three-hour exercise in frustration where you can't get more than a few hits off before something clobbers you from behind.

It's baffling, honestly, especially given all the noise Capcom has made about this being the most accessible *Marvel* game yet. There certainly are concessions to the novice player: *Infinite* borrows the fashionable genre trick of mapping an automated combo to repeated taps of the light-punch button, for instance, while an Easy Hyper Combo input allows you to pull off a flashy super move by pressing two buttons simultaneously. Yet if that suggests that Capcom has finally realised that newcomers need a helping hand as they seek to improve then, well, no. A tutorial walks you through the basics of movement, blocking and so on, and introduces you to the game's core systems. Combo trials quickly ask you to knock out extravagant 30-hit strings. There's nothing linking the two, nothing to teach you the building blocks of *Infinite*'s combat system: nothing that explains that you're limited to one ground bounce, one wall bounce and one off-the-ground attack, and must work to optimise your combos within that framework. You're just expected to work it out. Capcom's profound disinterest in helping players improve continues to be as frustrating as it is confusing.

Developer/publisher Capcom
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

Those prepared to put the hours in by themselves will find a game as fluid and flexible as any on the market



SAFETY NET
Hopes were not exactly high for *Marvel Vs Capcom: Infinite*'s online performance. Despite two revisions, *MVC3*'s netcode remained a shambles throughout its lifetime; the series may have more lenient input timings than Capcom's *Street Fighter* games, but the game was as good as unplayable online. And the publisher's attempt to power *SFV* with its in-house Capcom Fighters Network netcode hasn't gone so well either. Thankfully, in our tests, *Infinite* has performed wonderfully well, and it seems we can thank the publisher's return to Xbox for it: with no point in using CFN's cross-platform functionality, Capcom is again using platform-holder matchmaking APIs. It's all the better for it.

It's especially troubling because those with the strength to figure everything out for themselves will discover that there's a heck of a fighting game in *Infinite*. Despite the apparent reduction in complexity by reducing team sizes from three characters per side to two, this is a more freeform game than ever before; the ability to tag in an offscreen partner at any point, with a single button press, allowing for more flexibility in combo creation, and more devious tricks to open up an opponent, than were ever possible in the 3v3 days.

At the heart of it all are the Infinity Stones. Capcom's insistence before release that these would essentially play the role of a third character raised eyebrows, but if anything they're even more useful than that, equal parts assist move, combo tool, comeback mechanic and a way to compensate for a chosen character's deficiencies. Mayor Mike Haggar, for example, thrives up close, and struggles from range, yet using the right Stone he might earn a zippy dash to help him close space, a whip that yanks foes towards him, or a projectile to cover his approach. These moves, dubbed Infinity Surges, are activated with a single button press and can be used freely throughout battle, at no meter cost. When a gauge that accrues as you take damage is full, a double button press activates the Infinity Storm, a timed buff which might add knockback to all your attacks, reduce animation times to allow for custom combos, trap opponents in a cage that limits their moveset and movement, or even resurrect a fallen partner for a spell of two-on-one damage-dealing. *Marvel Vs Capcom 3* had hundreds of thousands of team compositions, and seemingly endless possibilities. Somehow, this seems to have it beat, despite the numbers being against it.

The memories of that abysmal story mode soon fade, and those prepared to put the hours in by themselves will find a game as fluid and flexible as any on the market. We're almost bored of chiding Capcom for its lack of interest in bridging the gap between mindless button-mashing and tournament-level play, but there was a real opportunity here: to use the allure of Marvel's characters to introduce a new mass of players to one of the most rewarding genres in games. Instead, many will mash light punch for a couple of hours, get hit in the back of the head a lot, and walk away still wondering what all the fuss is about.

6



ABOVE The final boss in both Arcade and Story mode is, in series tradition, an annoying fight. In Arcade, at least, you can quit out at the final hurdle and the game will still treat it as a clear, unlocking new character colours







TOP While this is Ryu's Hyper Combo projectile, he can add a similar effect to normal fireballs by holding down the punch button. **MAIN** Ghost Rider's rangey, whip-based playstyle seemingly makes him the Dhalsim of the piece, but the Infinity Stones render such pigeon-holing somewhat moot. **LEFT** It's certainly not the prettiest game you'll play this year, but once the fists start flying the action is too chaotic for you to notice what a weird job Capcom has done on some of the character faces

Steamworld Dig 2

Developer/publisher Image & Form
Format PC (tested), PS4, Switch, Vita
Release Out now

Beyond the obvious draw of new toys and trinkets, the real joy of a good Metroidvania is found in the moments where you're journeying blind; where your destination is known but the way there is not. There's a moment in the back half of *Steamworld Dig 2* where you've already explored quite some way, and you're set a familiar objective: to find three similar objects at three very different locations. The map opens up, and a trio of small Xs mark the spots you need to reach – points which reveal, to your growing delight, that you may have come pretty far already, but there's still much more of this fascinating space you've yet to visit, and plenty more secrets buried within.

What separates *Steamworld Dig 2* from its peers – and this was also true of the original – is a stronger sense of having made your own way there. Often in this type of game, you follow a circuitous route, but beyond the odd side path leading you to hidden pick-ups, there's basically one way to get where you need to go. Here, you're given the tools to (literally) carve your own path, to burrow off in different directions should the whim take you. To a point, your tunnelling is naturally constrained, with impenetrable chunks of thick rock maintaining a boundary. But this is a more elegant, subtle form of gating, ensuring that you can't explore to the map's extremes from the off and helping control the pacing. You don't have total freedom, but it's a convincing illusion, and that's enough.

It is, necessarily, a bit of a slow starter, though that's hardly atypical of the genre. Besides, there's a satisfaction inherent in the process of steadily chipping your way down from the surface. Image & Form gives a masterclass in feedback: you'll feel a brief judder in your hands as a tile yields to your pickaxe, the repetitive click, click, crack providing a calming background rhythm. And it's all the more satisfying when you're fully tooled-up: a jackhammer arm may take a few seconds to whirr up to speed, but once it's going, you'll easily power through rows and columns of rock. Later, you'll unlock a jetpack that, combined with a new ability, lets you quickly burn through soft earth – and suddenly those early, tentative steps feel like a long time ago.

New protagonist Dorothy's subterranean journey begins as a rescue mission: she's hoping to find poor Rusty, the original lead who was buried in a landslide at the first game's end. Meanwhile, ominous rumblings have spooked the local townsfolk and Dorothy begins to suspect these two events might not be unrelated. Just as Dorothy can head in unexpected directions, so too does the story, taking in doomsday cults, toxic jungles and a brief, moderately scary sequence that doubles as an unorthodox stealth section.

Elsewhere, Image & Form is mostly content to riff on existing ideas, though there are moments of delight in even its more familiar pleasures. Its hookshot feels great, zipping you across gaps when an enemy is in pursuit and up to ceilings when the floor gives way beneath you, or you misjudge a jump over a poison pool. And there's a sticky bomb which can blow up ore pockets overhead when careless digging has left them otherwise inaccessible, or to detonate rows of otherwise impenetrable blocks once you've located the one where the fault line begins.

In fact, little in *Steamworld Dig 2* is truly permanent, and many things can represent threat and opportunity at the same time. Hazards can be exploited: falling rocks can crush birds and beetles, while toxic drips can erode tiles to open up possible escape routes. Similarly, new kit can be dangerous. Digging carelessly with the jackhammer can ruin your carefully-plotted path back up; misjudge the arc of a grenade and instead of destroying an enemy you might just aggro them and their friends.

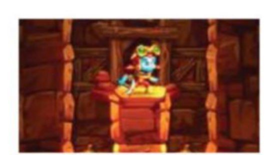
There's usually a reason to stray from your current objective, with caves and secret areas holding cogs which can be invested in a wide range of perks at the town's workbench. You might beef up your armour, for example, or double-up your pack space to fit two ores in a single slot and thus maximise your yield from each trip down. Few, in truth, are truly transformative, though one late ability which lets you fire those sticky bombs in mid-air is a godsend for one particular set-piece. Unique blueprints are earned by trading special artefacts, though these are worth seeking out as much for the amusing flavour text, which indulges the developer's fondness for pop-culture nods and jabs.

Often the process is more enjoyable than the reward. By turns, these grottos contain gentle environmental puzzles, gauntlets of arrows and bursting cacti, and the odd platforming set-piece. There's one especially perilous climb where solid ground is at a premium and spongy plants are both hindrance and help: land on them and they'll bounce you higher, but they'll also dissolve the platform once disturbed.

There are times when *Dig 2* challenges you in less inventive ways: areas where it simply increases the density of enemies and hazards and exposes the limitations of combat. There's one moment of frustratingly counter-intuitive design, and while the game's climactic encounter is exciting, the abundance of health pickups feels like a clumsy mea culpa for attacks that are nigh impossible to avoid. Otherwise, this is another terrific genre piece from one of the most consistent studios around, and the closest Image & Form has come to the modern classic of which it seems capable. For now, this gifted group of Swedes will have to console itself with the knowledge that, in the same month as Samus Aran's much-heralded return, it's made the best *Metroid* game in years.

8

There's a satisfaction inherent in the process of steadily chipping your way down

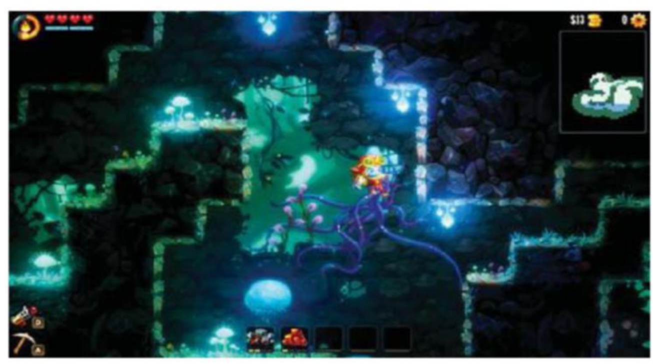


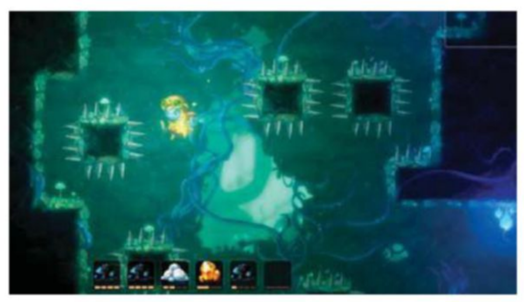
BURY IT AND RISE ABOVE
Since *Steamworld Dig 2*'s world sprawls out in every direction, it's good to have ways to speed up your regular trips back to the overground. A network of transportation tubes lets you fast-travel almost instantaneously, and while picking one is a straightforward matter of flicking between them on the map screen, the game understands you'll most often want to revisit the town, which is just a single button press away. Hop back in once you've traded your ores and made your upgrades and the same button will return you from whence you came. It's one of a number of considerate touches: rather than forcing you down a particular skill path, it's content to let you respec at any time. And if you don't want any kind of guidance, you can even turn the waypoint markers off.

RIGHT A tap of your pickaxe can bring dormant robots to life, letting them stomp harmlessly by while you grapple up and pass them. There are others you certainly won't want to wake up, however. MAIN Even in the early areas where the palette is dominated by browns, this is a much more colourful game than the first – and Dorothy's design helps in that regard. BOTTOM The post-game results screen shows Image & Form has both completionists and speedrunners in mind. A set of challenging trials awaits the most dedicated explorers









ABOVE In the early hours, you'll greet pockets of water with relief, since your pressure bombs and jackhammer both require it to run. If it's more than puddle deep, however, you can expect danger beneath the surface

Project Cars 2

Developer Slightly Mad Studios
Publisher Bandai Namco Entertainment
Format PC (tested), PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now

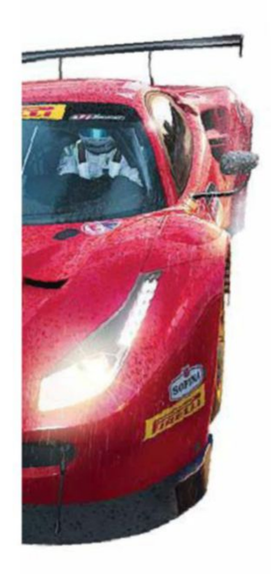
Project Cars 2 is, perhaps more than any other racer, a game about choices. Automatic or stick; rallycross or Le Mans; a beautiful summer's day or a dull, blisteringly cold one. Perhaps you'd prefer a midnight runaround under cover of darkness. Well then, do you want it at Suzuka, Silverstone, or Spa-Francorchamps? And we don't mean the modern F1 course; it's the 14km long, see-the-Belgian-countryside route from the '60s – a gauntlet that claimed many lives in the more dangerous days of motorsport. Oh, and before we start: would you like two laps, or 200?

That's a lot of questions, but you get the picture. *Project Cars 2* is for committed racing-game enthusiasts who live in thrall to every facet of speed, from tracks to tyre pressure and everything in between. It's for the veteran sim lovers, not to mention the time-poor purists who are so put off by the thought of having to *unlock* the best cars that almost everything is open to you from the get-go. Despite this unorthodox approach, developer Slightly Mad Studios succeeds in restructuring this much improved sequel. It offers a career mode that has a much greater sense of purpose – one that's no longer quite such an aimless sprawl.

Although it remains wildly accommodating to those here for freeform customisation and beneath-the-hood tinkering, *Project Cars 2*'s career first offers up, yep, another choice: which racing discipline to get started with. It's from there that you're propelled through a fabulously broad variety of different automotive series. Only the most advanced top-tier events are locked off when you first sign a contract for your chosen team. Also inaccessible are the game's brand new Invitationals, which provide more specific, guided undertakings with set parameters under five umbrella categories: Historic, Track Special, Low Grip, Road and Supercar. These unlock once you've put time into completing certain career milestones – completing 500 laps, for instance, or winning a particular championship. Overall it's a pleasant balance of progressing through the ranks of your chosen motorsport, while also retaining a level of freedom within those races. It's a mantra that extends from being able to adjust whether or not you engage in free practice and qualifying before the race, to being able to increase or reduce the number of laps for every event.

That's if you want to tackle the career at all. You are free, should you choose, to simply set up your own custom races, using a vast spread of options and settings that let you race a field of grippy, zippy Formula A cars around a pitch-black Nürburgring in the middle of autumn (yes, you can even set the time of year). Wedged into the superbly detailed cockpit view, *Project Cars 2* proves there's nothing quite like rocketing from the relative safety of a floodlit starting grid into pitch blackness, with only the faintest glint of a white line to mark the track's extremities, only the distant red glow of the car in front to gauge whether it's time to start braking yet.

It delivers nuanced, varied and fair handling to pad players without compromise



The original game's greatest sin, at least for those on console, was the way that, when the starting lights went green, any players using a gamepad were left in the dust. Simulation fans accept – and expect – a challenge, but those with a preference for a controller were poorly served by the *Project Cars* of 2015. The game's acceleration system simply didn't transpose well to a trigger, resulting in a disappointing, if not quite ruinous, lack of control. That's vastly different here: unlike its predecessor it delivers nuanced, varied and fair handling to pad players without compromise. Assists can be switched on and off mid-race with a quick dip into the menus, meaning that while the steep learning curve requires some effort to surmount, it is at least possible using standard console controls.

No matter how you tailor the difficulty, however, *Project Cars 2*'s moment-to-moment driving model is not exactly world-beating, thanks to an occasional floaty disconnect that rather tarnishes an otherwise authentic sense of traction. But Slightly Mad's achievement lies in the way it offers such a widespread roster which, while inconsistent in a couple of areas, makes each series of vehicles feel properly distinct from the other. At times, it doesn't just feel like you're racing different cars, but like you're playing different games entirely. Flit between a vintage Ferrari, worming your way through the barricaded streets of Long Beach; a rallycross event at Hell, where grip comes and goes as you careen off the asphalt into the mud; a Ford GT pelting around the sweeping apexes of Laguna Seca; or a teensy kart at Bathurst. *Project Cars 2* gets dangerously, dizzyingly close to the sim lover's dream.

Aside from the handling foibles, there are problems elsewhere; opponent AI is inconsistent, and a few bugs have snuck into the final code. Such issues are fixable, of course, but it means that when 26 cars bear down on Sainte Devote at Monte Carlo, the result is frequently a massive pile-up. Physics glitches are less game-breaking, but do mean you'll often find yourself spinning out if you catch opponents at odd angles. It's not unusual to see a souped-up BMW launch itself, without warning, high into the sky simply because it had a light collision into Druids at Brands Hatch.

Still, few games in this genre have so accurately portrayed the rampant kineticism of a fleet of McLaren P1s haring round a racetrack, the blind terror of rear water spray behind a Formula 3 car, or the perilous loss of grip as you aquaplane across a dynamically generated puddle. It's scrappy, sure, but no racer offers such a breadth of choice, or seems so willing to let the player set the rules of the road. When *Project Cars 2* gets into gear, there's little else like it.

8

ABOVE The location roster is one of the most comprehensive around, with over 50 circuits in some of the world's most iconic racing locations.



LEFT A grid of GTs running full pelt into the upward right-hand sweep at Spa's Raidillon is the perfect showcase of *Project Cars 2*'s complex and volatile physics model

BELOW Time of day affects visibility, but also ambient temperature. That in turn impacts grip levels at any given circuit. Slightly Mad, as the name implies, obsesses over the tiniest details



ABOVE Collisions on the courses can be brutal and dynamic – damage, as you'd expect, can be switched off, but the most authentic player experience is when an untimely shunt risks the end of your race



Divinity: Original Sin II

Divinity: Original Sin II is the sort of RPG where you can use a teleport spell to pluck a merchant from their stall before dropping them onto a pool of magical fire that you've created round the back of a house, all to get away with murder and, once you've looted their corpse, theft. Limitations are few and far between in the tumultuous land of Rivellon; if you've got some madcap idea, chances are that you'll at least be able to make a valiant attempt at making it happen.

Though not strictly an open-world game, its large maps separated by chapters and loadscreens, this is still very much a sandbox where anything goes, evoking the likes of *Ultima 7*. Every NPC can be fought and killed, every quest has multiple solutions, and almost every combat skill can be used in experimental ways.

Indeed, there's nothing stopping you from sauntering into a town and setting fire to everything, leaving its poor citizens burned to a crisp. Such unrestrained hostility might make some quests harder, if not impossible, because you've killed off an important NPC. But Larian has seen this behaviour, and its potential results, coming. There are major consequences to your actions, sure, and it can be hard to keep track of them all as the game progresses, especially with a quest journal that's confusing and inconsistent. But it's difficult to screw yourself over entirely.

Pick an undead character, and you might have no choice but to burn down a whole town, lest they burn you first. Every race has traits that define them: Elves, for instance, are able to eat dead bodies and gain their memories, but you then get to choose if they're living or undead. The undead, well, aren't so popular, and so if anyone catches a glimpse of that grinning skull, they'll become hostile. Hats quickly become very important.

These choices, made right at the start, have a significant and broad impact, potentially changing how you approach quests and combat. It's the extra roleplaying options and personalised touches that make them feel meaningful, however. If you find yourself in a romantic embrace and you're undead, for example, the narrator goes so far as to describe what kissing a skull would be like. Someone with the 'mystic' or 'scholar' background traits, meanwhile, might be able to translate ancient tablets or figure out their origins.

With so many systems, quest solutions and bits of dialogue tied to specific races or traits, there's a lot that can be missed in a single playthrough, but the addition of companions significantly reduces the fear of missing out. You can play with up to three others, either controlled by you, or three friends in co-op. In singleplayer, you can actually choose their class from a list of pre-made options – though strictly speaking this is a classless game, where skills can be mixed and matched as you see fit – and eventually you can respec them entirely. Yet as handy as it is to have a party that can do all manner of things, from teleporting innocent merchants to sneaking past angry crocodiles, companions are much more than part of a toolkit. *Original Sin II* boasts excellent writing throughout, but the best is saved for the chats you'll have with your adventure troupe. Fane, the undead Eternal, is particularly essential thanks to his sarcastic commentary and general ignorance about the habits of fleshy mortals. Unlike your typical RPG party, however, companions in *Original Sin II* are also your competition.

Developer/publisher Larian Studios
Format PC
Release Out now

Creating weird, messy builds to experiment with is one of the joys of Original Sin II

See, the world is in a pretty terrible state. The Magisters who are meant to be protecting it have become corrupt zealots, terrifying void beasts have been causing all sorts of problems, and everyone's blaming source magic, or more specifically the sorcerers who use it – including you and your pals. In traditional RPG fashion, you're special, and must ascend to godhood in order to save everyone. You're not the only one, however; each companion has a similar destiny and a divine sponsor egging them on, which leads to some awkward conversations between the group. A pragmatic approach is best because you'll almost certainly want your buddies to watch your back in the game's dastardly turn-based battles. It's like *XCOM*, but ten times as chaotic. On one side, there's the traditional tactical elements: positioning, height, range, zones of control. But things are complicated by magic, engulfing whole areas in flames or turning them into toxic swamps.

Creating weird, messy builds to experiment with is one of the joys of *Original Sin II*. Since any character can learn any skill, there's an overwhelming number of options. You can craft a warrior who focuses on making enemies bleed so that they can summon demonic imps and turrets out of that blood, or a priest who summons lightning and rain, blessing the puddles left behind so that they can be used to heal anyone standing in them. Combat is good enough to support an entire game, and it's certainly enough to justify the Arena PvP mode, which lets you test your mettle and custom builds against others. The mode also benefits from arenas designed for battle, though that's not to say that fights don't consistently take place in tactically intriguing areas during the campaign. What's surprising about this is that combat can take place anywhere, since you can attack any NPC. Yet rare is the battlefield that doesn't feel bespoke, full of chokepoints, traps, explosive barrels and multiple levels that never feel out of place.

This amount of detail is very much par for the course. It's an utterly huge, ambitious game – 100 hours *might* do it – but it never feels anything less than lovingly handcrafted, its every component part given the same special attention. Its individual elements, the combat, the writing, would be high points in any other game, but *Divinity: Original Sin II* has it all.

9



MASTER OF ALL
Along with the co-op and Arena modes, *Original Sin 2* boasts a Game Master mode that recreates the experience of making and running a tabletop campaign. The simple, but robust, tools require no modding or coding experience to get to grips with, and it's perfectly possible to conjure up a brief campaign in an afternoon. While it contains plenty of assets from the game, you'll also be able to add your own, so you don't need to stick to fantasy settings. If you've got an idea for a pirate RPG or a cyberpunk romp rattling around inside your head, with a bit of extra work, you'll be able to create it in the GM mode.

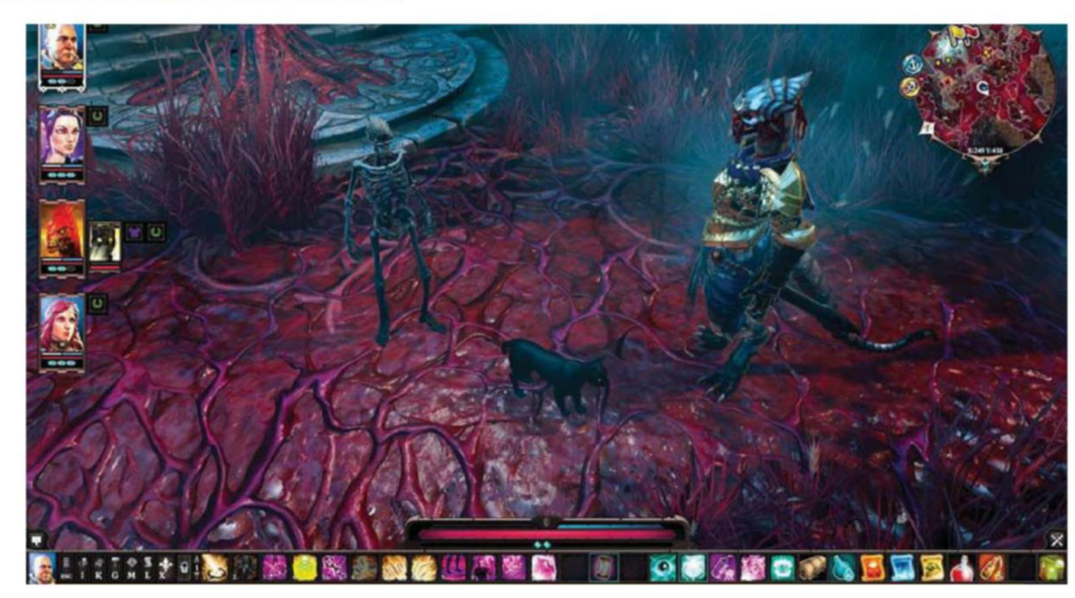






ABOVE Poison baths are big among the undead. Good thing it heals them as much as it harms everyone else. Just try not to splash your teammates

MAIN Enemies love nothing more than to watch everything go up in flames. Even if it's a boat that they're standing on. (Always try and keep a rain spell handy.)
ABOVE A bucket might not be high fashion, but dying isn't exactly de rigeur either. Don't worry, you'll get nicer headgear. Every piece of clothing you find will also change depending on which race is wearing it.
RIGHT Travel with the Red Prince, and you'll also get an extra party member: a black cat who can leap around the battlefield, scratch enemies and magically switch places with its owner



Star Fox 2

Developer In-house, Argonaut Software
Publisher Nintendo
Format SNES
Release Out now

So a delayed game is eventually good, hmm? Well, there aren't many that have been postponed for as long as *Star Fox 2*. Cancelled shortly before its planned release in early 1996, what may have been a remarkable accomplishment on seasoned hardware would have looked outdated next to the PlayStation's early games; with the N64 around the corner, it would have seemed more technically impoverished still. Its belated arrival as a bonus treat on the SNES Classic Mini, unlocked upon completing the first stage of the original game, has been touted as reason alone to invest in Nintendo's miniature throwback. As a matter of historical record, it's inherently fascinating; as a game, it's less likely to hold your attention.

Still, there are things to admire – most notably the game's inventive structure. Andross has returned, with his sights trained on Corneria, and it's up to the Star Fox team to keep it protected, infiltrating bases on local planets while destroying carriers to stall his offensive. You're free to select your next destination from the galactic map, but you'll have to prioritise threats: if Corneria reaches 100 per cent damage, it's game over. You can choose to intercept missiles and waves of enemies as they head toward the planet, but targeting the source might be the quicker route to success, even if it means suffering collateral damage. The clock's ticking during the missions, too, incentivising efficient tactics and introducing a source of constant tension.

The sense of looming peril is palpable, with radio warnings from Corneria alerting you to imminent danger, as the driving soundtrack lends dogfights against the Star Wolf team even greater urgency. Alas, these sequences amount to guiding a jerky crosshair around in firstperson as arrows point you in the direction of the nearest enemy, their craft lurching into view for a few seconds before the process is repeated. And the walker sections, where you transform into a robot chicken to trigger floor switches and blast targets, are often alarmingly easy. Turning with L and R is sluggish, but d-pad strafing with your thumb pressed down on the fire button will see you through most encounters.

We can only speculate as to how it might have been greeted two decades ago, of course, but the years have not been kind to *Star Fox 2*, despite the success of an unorthodox narrative framework that was, in many respects, before its time. Since its ending can be reached within an hour, those fortunate enough to get their hands on Nintendo's shrunken SNES may find it worth a quick play or two, but plenty of its 16bit peers have aged rather better. For once, that famous maxim of Miyamoto's doesn't really apply.

5



SEVERAL FOX GIVEN
Fox, Falco, Slippy and Peppy are joined by new recruits Miyu (a lynx) and Fay (a dog), with each member of the Star Fox team having their own ship and special ability. Miyu and Fay's nimble craft have limited shields but they can deploy a temporary barrier; Slippy and Peppy's slow but well-protected ships can recover shields; Fox and Falco's balanced fighters have bombs. Should your chosen leader perish, you can continue as their wingman, though in doing so you'll lose a bonus which can affect your grade.

The difficulty setting affects the places you'll visit and the number of enemies you'll have to defeat. You need to destroy two carriers and rescue two planets on Normal mode; on Hard, it's up to four and three respectively







Metroid: Samus Returns

Developer MercurySteam
Publisher Nintendo
Format 3DS
Release Out now

For once, 'Samus it ever was' just won't do. In typically contrarian Nintendo fashion, the long-awaited return of 2D *Metroid* is a remake of one of the series' weaker entries. It makes sense the more you think about it. Revisiting a flawed game, after all, offers greater scope for improvement, and MercurySteam has certainly fulfilled its remit in that regard, expanding upon the Game Boy original in such a way that those four-colour foundations are barely recognisable. Or maybe Nintendo had enough doubts about the developer not to risk handing over the keys to an acknowledged classic like, say, *Super Metroid*. If so, after playing *Samus Returns*, you'll understand its reticence.

Broadly speaking, the story remains the same. Samus lands on planet SR-388 and steadily journeys down into its cavernous innards, killing a given number of Metroids to trigger a mechanism that drains the hazardous substance preventing her from exploring deeper. But from the outset there's an increased focus on combat that makes the opening hours a drag. Enemies hit with surprising force, and when you've only got one or two energy tanks there's little room for error. The claustrophobic environments mean ignoring them is rarely an option, but everything seems to take a few too many shots to kill. The alternative is to wait for them to attack, a bright flash giving you a split-second to launch a melee counter that stuns them. It's never explained why a swing of Samus's arm is so much more powerful than her projectiles, but once a creature is stunned, you have a few seconds to finish it off.

Things improve once you've expanded your missile capacity, located a few energy tanks and picked up some new toys, while more traditional gating makes exploration more than just a long, slow descent. Meanwhile, the pace naturally picks up once you're able to run and jump past enemies instead of stopping to give them a whack. There's a more propulsive sense of progression, since the Metroids you face steadily evolve the further you go, not only looking more fearsome, but also learning new attack strategies that freshen up encounters. It's not quite enough. Questionable collision detection is a persistent annoyance, collapsing and respawning blocks make for some needlessly finicky Morph ball sections, and though the 3D effect is used well, there's something slightly amiss about the visual style. Though they're mostly backloaded, there are exhilarating moments scattered throughout *Samus Returns* that ensure it holds your attention to the end. Even so, its ragged edges mean it feels more like a competent cover version that occasionally strays off key, rather than the genuine article.

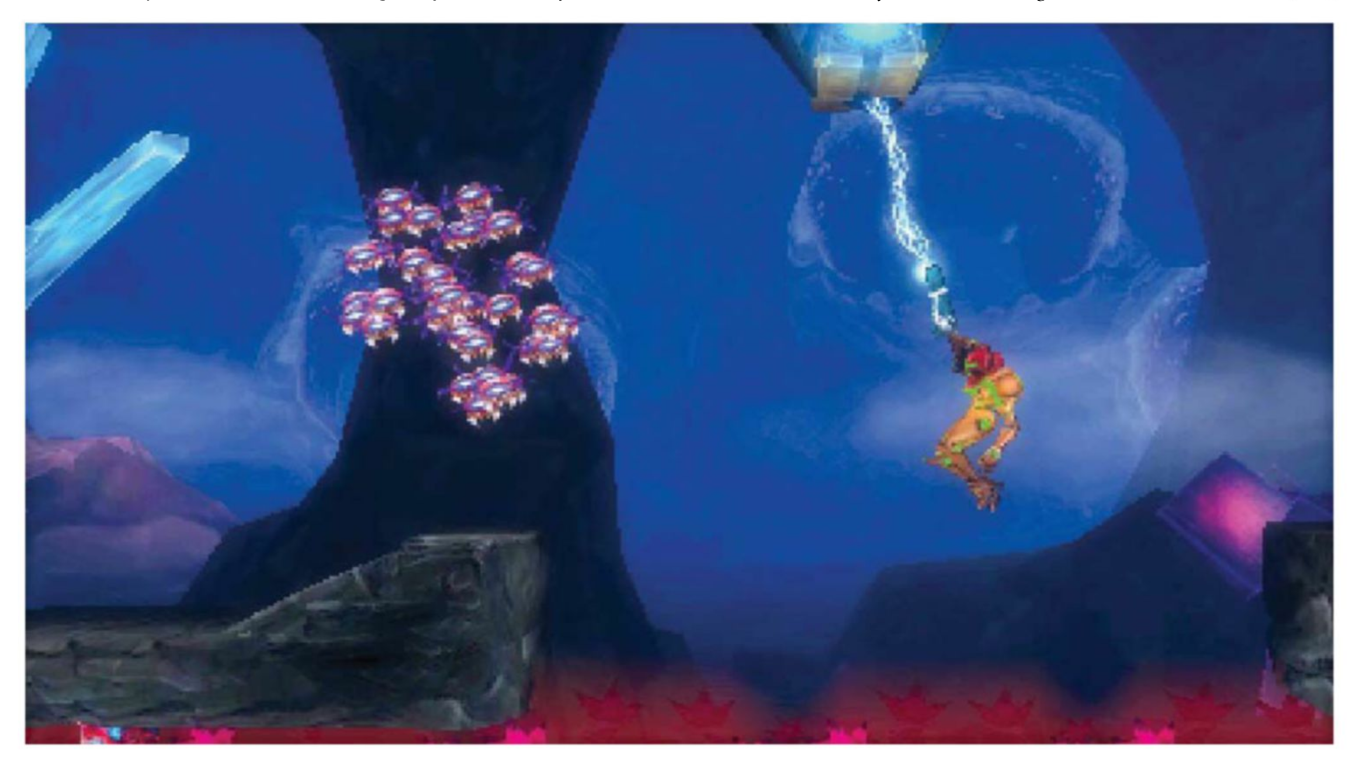
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The grapple beam feels oddly awkward to use, requiring you to hold down L and Y and rock the circle pad back and forth to get a good swing going. It's a lot of fun to pull down Metroids from the ceiling, mind you



LEFT THE AEION ON

Samus acquires four new special abilities which run off a gauge that's replenished quickest via the melee counter. Aeion energy powers a shield, a scanner that highlights breakable scenery and fills in local areas on the map screen, a rapid-fire ability that makes combat less attritional, and there's a fourth we shan't spoil. It's rather too easy to forget you've not toggled it off, however, leading to moments where you waste it all before you need it most.





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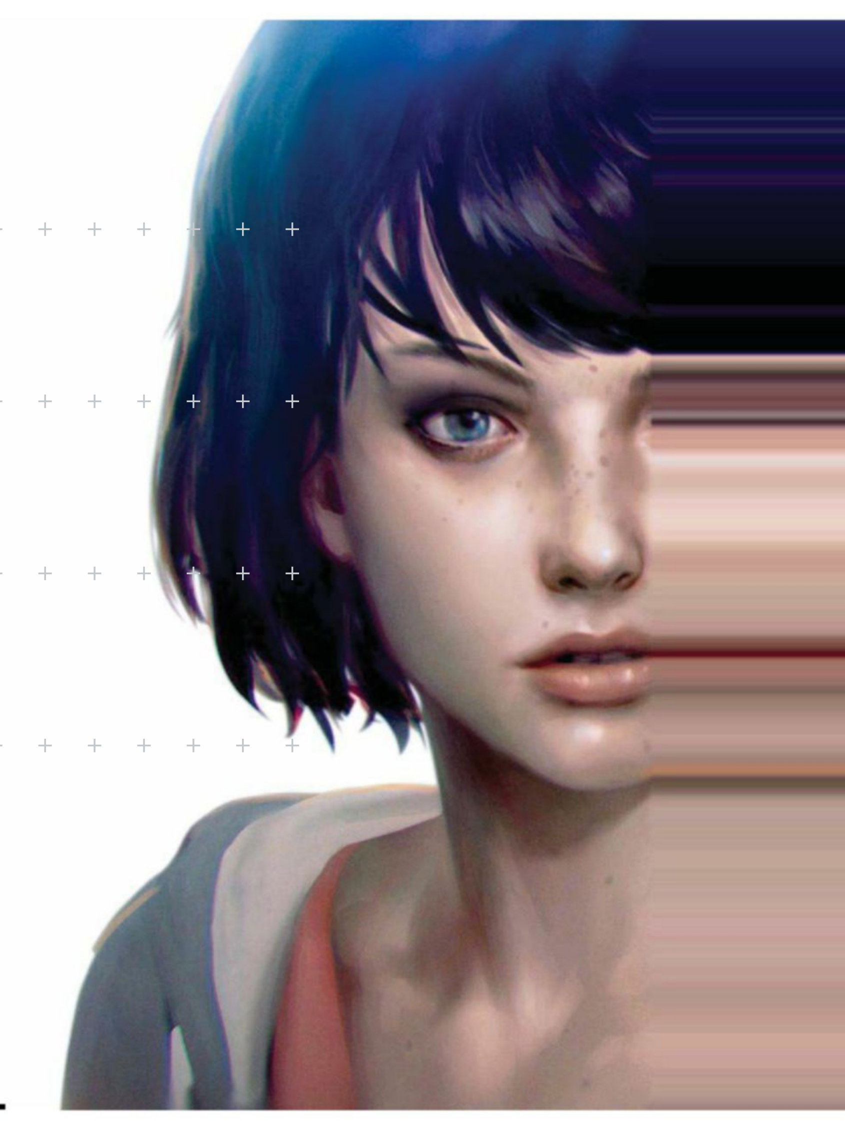


zinio



Available on the
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Life Is Strange

The time-bending teen drama that's a self-aware meditation on fate

By Jen Simpkins

Developer Dontnod Entertainment **Publisher** Square Enix **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2015

The opening credits of *Life Is Strange* see Max Caulfield put in her earbuds as she walks Blackwell Academy's corridors. She is soundtracking her life (we've all done it at some point), the star of her own show. And the thing about being a teenager is that you're absolutely, devastatingly certain that the entire universe really does revolve around you. It's not a selfish thought – not even a conscious one. You're convinced that everything you say or do carries enormous cosmic weight. Make a mistake, and it's the end of the world. In Max's case, that melodramatic statement has a particular ring of truth to it.

Dontnod's affecting tale tapped into that self-consciousness and wove it into a videogame mechanic. While the studio had played with the idea of time travel and manipulation before, in its debut game *Remember Me*, it found the perfect setting in *Life Is Strange*. After a scuffle with a bully in a bathroom leaves her former best friend Chloe Price bleeding out on the tiles, the traumatic event triggers a change in Max: she finds herself suddenly able to rewind time. Preventing Chloe's death is, obviously, her first act, and a heroic one. Over the course of five episodes, this new ability and its applications mean Max's story builds from teen drama to apocalyptic horror. But Max's power also, wonderfully, becomes a much more quotidian part of her life. Regret and perfectionism are both distinctly teenage and videogamey concepts. Imagine, as an 18-year-old, you were suddenly given the power to redo almost anything at will – every embarrassing situation, every awkward conversation. Of *course* you would take the opportunity to min-max adolescence.

For Max, it's about reducing her percentage chance of total social mortification: if she is mocked by a bully, it's easy enough to hit rewind and steer the conversation in a less humiliating direction. For us, it is at least partly about the promise of a 'good' ending, the implication now packaged in with every game involving branching narrative and dialogue choices. Make an effort to cheer up Max's struggling friend, selecting, rewinding and re-selecting options until satisfied with your level of control over the situation, and the secret expectation is that you will be rewarded for your philanthropy somewhere down the line. A situation in the very first episode calls more pointed attention to the fuzzy morality of Max's fun new power. Taking a closer look at a classmate's binned pregnancy test sees her caught red-handed by its furious owner. Respecting Dana's privacy by not looking doesn't get you in trouble. But you can rewind time after having already nosed your way into her affairs, meaning you're still in the know and nobody's any the wiser. You're even rewarded for it later: your illicit info allows you to carefully broach the subject and Dana praises Max's remarkable intuition, confiding in her. A regular chronokinetic Mother Theresa, our Max.

And in case the butterflies everywhere – bathrooms, Max's journal, UI prompts reminding you that your actions will have consequences – weren't a dead giveaway, these choices resonate. The little things web, like cracks in glass, into bigger pictures. That all-important rescue of Chloe gives rise to the main thrust of *Life Is Strange*: Max and Chloe's friendship revived around the supernatural happenstance, and strengthened by their investigations into missing Arcadia Bay resident Rachel Amber. But mini-arcs set in motion develop and offer more choices and changes in the world as time goes on. Arcadia Bay and its denizens feel alive, despite iffy lip-syncing and some instances of questionable dialogue, because of the little things. Accidentally break a snowglobe in episode one, and it can still be seen, sad and smashed, in episode three. Choose to tamper with train tracks later – one of several ways to rescue the perpetually unfortunate Chloe – and a tourist you bump into in the next episode laments being stuck in town because of it. Graffitiing a wall, tampering with a guest list, signing an anti-surveillance petition: all of it affects Max's home in subtle but visible ways, and all of it makes Arcadia Bay feel like the small town it is supposed to be. So do the moments in which you're not really doing anything. The sleepy seaside locale is filled with opportunities to watch the world go ▶

by – to reflect upon the choices you've made thus far, and how they might unfold. Getting up from a convenient seat must be done with the press of a button, so flocks of swallows, Max's inner thoughts and an atmospheric soundtrack often provide nebulous enough reasons not to, at least for a little while. Sitting on a bench outside the dormitories where squirrels play; laying on Chloe's bed in the cold morning light to hear the full length of a song; perching on packing boxes and watching dust dance in an empty room full of memories. Few games offer this kind of contemplative downtime, and even fewer in this much style.

These are not deep internal monologues about whether Max should have had the waffles instead of the pancakes, mind you. Early on in Max's story, a vulnerable friend of hers attempts suicide. Having frittered away much of your time-bending stamina – the limitations of which, admittedly, never really make sense – on experimental stunts, as teenagers and videogame players are wont to do, you're unable to stop her using Max's powers. How convincing your argument for her life is depends on how much attention you've been paying to her while hammering those 'good ending' platitudes. And there's no fail-safe: screw it up, and she dies. Her presence is erased from the ongoing story. Candles and flowers appear at her dorm room door. It is, effectively, your fault. Many assumed the outcome was a single, preordained result until they were shown the percentage split of player decisions at the end of the episode. The fact that you're able to prevent the worst outcome means that if it happens, it is all the more shameful.

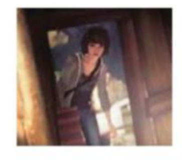
Jonathan Morali's original soundtrack plays a wistful accompaniment, while indie tracks from Mogwai and Foals are used in certain scenes to devastating effect

Sometimes, *Life Is Strange* seems to suggest at this point, there is a right thing to say. Perhaps it is a kind of problematic fuel for the rest of the playthrough, in which your socially anxious efforts to keep everyone happy are reframed and redoubled – then thwarted by several rug-pull moments where it becomes increasingly clear that there is no correct answer, no matter how many times Max hits rewind. Exploring all the available paths of certain conversations often results in realising you must simply pick between two less-than-ideal outcomes, each with unknown and far-reaching repercussions. Meanwhile, a supposedly superhero moment in episode three prompts a heartbreaking twist that, again, holds Max and her powers accountable for her well-meaning meddling. Although the decision it leads to ultimately doesn't matter – the timelines converge again regardless of your actions – it still feels like it means everything. In the grand scheme of things, it does. Chloe's card is irrevocably marked, and the more you try to scrub that mark away, the more you realise Max's superhuman efforts to save her best friend – or, according to your decisions, lover – are ripping apart Arcadia Bay. All that teen angst and timeline-tinkering has

THE FACT THAT YOU'RE ABLE TO PREVENT THE WORST OUTCOME MEANS THAT IF IT HAPPENS, IT IS ALL THE MORE SHAMEFUL

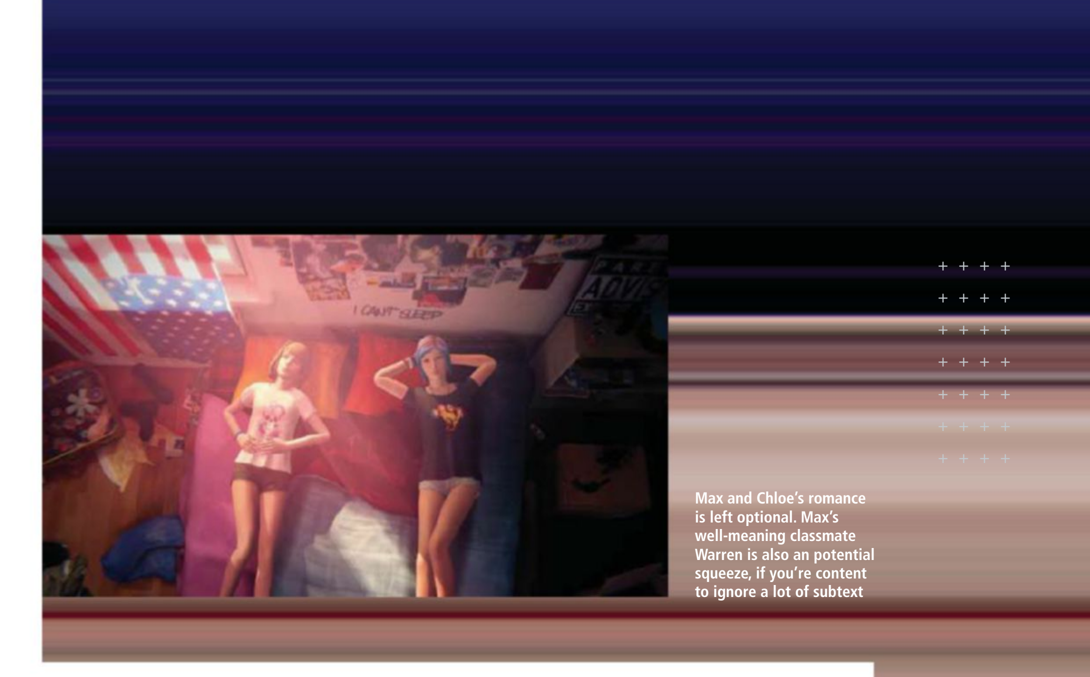


A late memory-jogging sequence is as functional as it is emotional for the player of the episodic game



BE KIND REWIND

Bending time in your favour extends beyond the questionable manipulation of your every social interaction. A good amount of teen angst is broken up by creative puzzles that force you to mentally reshuffle time and space. Breaking into an office undetected, for example, requires you to engineer a messy way in before undoing it all and locking yourself out again, a key now safely in hand. Another late-game solution has you pull down some machinery to use as a platform to get up to the place it has fallen from, needing plenty of rewinds and much logical flexibility. They're best in believable, relevant scenarios: the light time-altering is less inspiring in an early bottle fetch quest that is, to Dontnod's credit, purposefully parodied in the final episode.



Max and Chloe's romance is left optional. Max's well-meaning classmate Warren is also an potential squeeze, if you're content to ignore a lot of subtext

somehow manifested a very real tornado. Meanwhile, there's only one, awful timeline in which the book on Rachel Amber's disappearance can be meaningfully closed.

Everything leads up to this choice-based, time-bending game's knowingly contradictory message: don't mess with fate. While it is subtler in the early episodes, episode five's nightmare sequence hammers it home. Here, a truly 'no win' dialogue choice is masterfully unsettling, as is the bluntness with which Max's doppelganger addresses her doe-eyed original and the player's motivations in one fell swoop. "Thought you could control everybody and everything, huh?" she mocks. "I only wanted to do the right thing," you might reply. "No, you only wanted to be popular," retorts the other Max. "Your big plan was to trick people into thinking you give a rat's ass." *Life Is Strange*'s greatest achievement is that despite their cringeworthy memespeak and wooden facial expressions, by the story's end, you do care about the residents of Arcadia Bay. It makes the inevitable final decision you must make, faced with a cataclysmic storm and the realisation that you may have done more harm than good, all the more difficult.

But if you've been paying attention, there is only one choice to be made. It is borne out by its ending – a beautifully scored, lengthy and sentimental sequence. The alternative, meanwhile, is a hurried consolation prize whose very existence seems to undermine what *Life Is Strange* has been trying to say for five episodes. There's a sense that Dontnod felt pressured to provide players with the level of immersive agency to which they have grown so accustomed, despite its game making an occasionally flawed but often rather elegant meta-case against altering a narrative according to one's wants and whims. It's a shame, then, that it couldn't find the strength to make its final point a mandatory one. But provided players are mature enough to bear out a wonderfully introspective arc to its logical conclusion, *Life Is Strange* is one of gaming's greatest coming-of-age stories, no matter how old you are. The quintessential teenage epiphany is once again posited to the modern, Telltale-coddled player of choice-based games: perhaps the whole world doesn't revolve around you, after all. ■

Arcadia Bay's growing list of natural anomalies portend doom, from dual moons and tornadoes to beached whales



Life Is Feudal: MMO

A medieval MMO built on grit, passion and Russian determination

Developer/ publisher Bitbox Ltd
Format PC
Origin Russia
Release 2017

You may sense something of George R. R. Martin in *Life Is Feudal*. That's no coincidence: A Song Of Ice And Fire ignited the imagination of Bitbox CEO Vladimir Piskunov back in 2010. The first book was his favourite, since the fairytale elements were kept to a minimum; Piskunov was captivated instead by the earthiness of its universe. Here, he says, was a world of "blood, dirt, steel, courage, intrigue and betrayal". Inspired, too, by the PvP politics and backstabbing within the likes of *Shadowbane*, *Darkfall* and *Eve Online*, he set out to capture those elements in his own dream game: a medieval-themed sandbox MMO.

Passion and pocket change kept Piskunov and his small team buoyant until they attracted an investor in late 2011. Bitbox Ltd was subsequently founded, and development continued with an expanded group of 13 employees. By early 2014, Bitbox had begun early alpha tests, setting up servers and inviting in 800 players, but Piskunov quickly realised that a fully featured MMO might be beyond the resources of such a small team. "We were unable to keep up an adequate pace of development while fixing bugs – especially bugs that appeared after players had crossed a couple of server nodes in our game."

It was then that Piskunov had a brainwave, suggesting Bitbox could release a smaller-scale 'pocket' version of *Life Is Feudal*, giving players the freedom to change the rules as much as they liked – hence 'Your Own'. Designed for smaller groups, or for lone players keen either to tinker with the game's Creative mode or to apply outlandish mods, *Life Is Feudal: Your Own* would, Piskunov reckoned, be a complementary experience to the forthcoming MMO. Within 48 hours of its Early Access launch, it had recouped its entire development costs. Its player count has held steady at around 300,000 since, and Bitbox has been able to amass a team of more than 70 staffers to work on the version of *Life Is Feudal* Piskunov first conceived.

BITBOX HAS IMPLEMENTED MOUNTED COMBAT, GUILD INTERACTIONS, TERRAFORMING AND A CRAFTING SKILL THAT LETS YOU BREW ALCOHOL

In a game with so many systems, it's an ambitious undertaking. Since the original build, Bitbox has implemented mounted combat, guild interactions, throwing weapons, terraforming improvements, and even a crafting skill that lets you brew your own alcohol – not to mention constant optimisation to prepare itself for running the full-fat MMO. Bitbox has, Piskunov says, learned to listen to and engage with its community during the course of the project – going as far as to allow players to vote on development priorities. That's understandable when you consider the investment of the game's most dedicated fans: there are several Steam profiles boasting a playtime into the thousands of hours. "Some players just want to be distracted from their daily activities for an hour or so. But those who really want to live an alternative life in a medieval setting have no other option but our game," Piskunov says. It's clear, in other words, that *Life Is Feudal* isn't just the game of *his* dreams. ■



"*Minecraft* for grown-ups" is Piskunov's catchy elevator pitch, though he concedes it doesn't come close to covering why so many players have fallen for *Life Is Feudal*. The expansive world of the MMO will support more than 10,000 players, and feature large-scale battles alongside a vast range of other systems including

A progress report on the games we just can't quit



Dota 2

Developer/publisher Valve **Format** PC **Release** 2013

Dota 2's position has always been unique. As a game, it retains the spirit of the mod it once was – the messy organic sprawl of a community creation. Much of the shape of the modern MOBA is owed to the way that modders toyed with each other's creations in the days of *Warcraft III*: the original role of *Dota 2*'s anonymous lead developer, IceFrog, was as a sort of tinkerer-steward, pulling together hero ideas from dozens of variants and mingling them with his own. An accidental consequence of this structure – but a happy one for Riot Games – was that heroes could just as easily be broken out again, individually itemised, and sold one by one to players. In the branch of its existence that became *League Of Legends*, *Defense Of The Ancients* (*DotA*) laid the foundations for what we now understand as free to play.

The case of Valve's *Dota 2* is different. As a product, it drives Steam installs in territories that Valve would otherwise struggle to reach, such as Russia and China. Its cosmetic-item store generates vast sums, and its crowdfunded annual championships have become the most moneyed esports event in the world. Yet these are bolt-ons – money doesn't touch the game's heart, and *Dota 2* is defined by the fact that everything essential for free is truly free, not free-to-play free. That includes all 113 heroes, every power-modifying item, and *Dota 2*'s singular map: Valve's MOBA is one where every player can be assumed to have access to every tool, and this continues to fundamentally shape the way the game is developed.

The rate of major updates has slowed dramatically since *Dota 2*'s beta phase, which lasted until mid-2013. New heroes now arrive at a rate of one or two per year, slower than in MOBAs that have a business incentive to generate new heroes for players to buy. Even so, change has come. Last year saw the final *DotA* character ported to Valve's remake, and the game has since received its first hero, Monkey King, whose design is untrammelled by the limits of the *Warcraft III* engine. In practical terms, this means he can climb trees.

The release of the game's 7.0 update in late 2016 brought substantial alterations to the map and to in-game character progression. Initial shock at these changes has since matured into an understanding that *Dota 2*'s core identity hasn't changed – the health of the competition at this year's International championships attests to that. As it approaches its fifth year, *Dota 2* remains unique: supremely generous and utterly inaccessible, popular and exclusive, finely balanced and quixotically complex. ■

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